# Mocking the Mainstream

## Pop, Parody, and Politics in the Twenty-first Century

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# DECLARATION OF AUTHORSHIP

I, Rachel McCarthy, hereby declare that this thesis and the work presented in it is entirely my own. Where I have consulted the work of others, this is always clearly stated.

Signed: ……..

Date: ……..

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# ABSTRACT

This thesis focuses on twenty-first century pop parody as a lens through which to examine the politics of pop music. It includes close analysis of several parody case studies, combined with an exploration of several formats of mainstream pop—Motown, hip hop, and boy band music—which are the targets of these parody songs. The project focuses particularly on parody songs whose musical aesthetics satirise those of mainstream pop, while the lyrics self-reflexively name the musical devices that are mocked. I consider how these parody songs function, who or what they aim to critique, and how successful that critique is. The Introduction sets out research questions, method, and chapter summaries, and discusses Žižek's theory of cynical distance, which is a key obstacle that the parody songs must negotiate. The thesis is then divided into three parts. Part I, composed of Chapter 1, provides the first comprehensive survey of types of musical comedy and parody. In setting out scholarship on mainstream and manufactured pop, I conclude that despite the recent 'poptimist' turn of pop music studies, the aesthetics of 'manufactured' pop are still largely overlooked.

Part II, comprising Chapters 2 and 3, focuses on parody songs by the musical comedy duo Flight of the Conchords. Chapter 2 shows how the group incorporate a self-reflexive awareness of the problem of cynical distance in their parody of Marvin Gaye's 'What's Going On', presenting an effective critique of the use of pop music as political protest. The parody song highlights issues pertaining to the politics of Motown music, prompting a re-formulation of received narratives surrounding 'What's Going On'. Chapter 3 examines the racial dynamics in parodies of black musical genres, including hip hop, by Flight of The Conchords, Weird Al Yankovic, and Lil Dicky, among other artists. I argue that the self-reflexivity displayed by these comedic white rappers is insufficient to overcome the problem of cultural appropriation in pop music and parody.

Part III, comprising Chapters 4 and 5, focuses on boy band music. Filling a lacuna in research on boy band music aesthetics, Chapter 4 outlines the aesthetics and socio-economic characteristics this pop format. I argue that boy band music's social function must be theorised using the tools of both feminism and Marxism (not one or the other). Chapter 5 explores boy band parodies by Axis of Awesome, Da Vinci's Notebook, and Jon Lajoie. Analysis of the function and structure of these songs highlights issues of race, gender, authenticity, and commercialism in parody and pop. I find that pop parody is a useful tool for understanding power dynamics in pop music, and that the parody songs constitute key sites for the workings of ideology, particularly relating to capitalism, race, and gender.

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# INTRODUCTION

The music video opens with a shot of a turquoise swimming pool, with the water glistening in the light. Three young men lounge at the side of the pool, posing in front of long white curtains attached to a large suburban home. The men are dressed in cream chinos, short-sleeved white shirts, and grey sweater vests. Gazing into the camera with sincere expressions, they croon: 'baby girl, I wanna show you how much I really love you'. The music evokes late 90s or early 2000s R&B: it has a smooth, understated groove; relaxed tempo; broken 7th and 9th chords played on a guitar; an electric drum track; and occasionally a wind chime-like 'shimmer' instrumental effect. The camera shots move fluidly between different generically domestic settings—a cream sofa, a bedroom, a suburban backyard—that include touches of romantic cliché: the young men and the women they sing to are shown drinking champagne in a gazebo decorated with fairy lights, or lying on a bed strewn with rose petals. The outfits worn by the singers change as frequently as the settings. The first forty-five seconds of the video includes four costume changes, including oversized sportswear, brightly coloured shirts and ties, and polo shirts in pastel hues.

The video might appear to be typical of a love song by an R&B-inflected boy band from the late 90s or early 2000s.[1] From the outset, however, several signals suggest that all is not what it seems. Most obviously, the self-referential lyrics indicate a lack of sincerity:

> Baby girl, I wanna show you how much I really love you (how much I really love you)
> Baby girl, that's what I call you to show you that my love for you is true
> Baby girl, my love is so great that I wrote you this song
> And to show you how much I really care it sounds like every other one

The lyrics continue by narrating what happens in the music and video:

> The beat kicks in and then I sing a bit more rhythmically
> To make it sensual I sing it in a minor key
> I move my hands like I'm pushing someone in front of me

[1] The video for Boyz II Men's 'I'll Make Love To You' (1994) is set in a similar house with white and cream décor, while a swimming pool features in Aaron Hall's 'I'll Miss You' (1993) and Justin Timberlake's 'What Goes Around' (2006). BoyzIIMenVEVO, *Boyz II Men - I'll Make Love To You*, 2009, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fV8vB1BB2qc&list=PLeYg_hwALdsRK9GjsCJio1Nwhk15D-N8x; AaronHallVEVO, *Aaron Hall - I Miss You (Official Video)*, accessed 27 October 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MkEATnHMYIs; justintimberlakeVEVO, *Justin Timberlake - What Goes Around...Comes Around*, 2009, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TOrnUquxtwA.

By the time the song arrives at the chorus its parodic intent is clear: 'This is how you write a love song/yeah, a shitty 90s R&B love song'. This, then, is not a straightforward love song, but a parody—specifically, a parody of 90s and 2000s boy band/R&B music. Titled 'How to Write a Love Song', it was produced by the Australian musical comedy trio Axis of Awesome in 2010.[2] Along with the lyrics, satirical intent is communicated through the music and visuals of the video. The gestures and dance moves are performed by the singers with mock sincerity. Some musical devices are clearly satirised—such as the modulation up a semitone towards the end of the song, which happens twice in order to draw attention to the clichéd gesture.

'How to Write a Love Song' caught my attention for several reasons. I was used to encountering pop parody videos that retain the music of a specific original song while changing the lyrics and visuals in a humorous or subversive manner.[3] Axis of Awesome's video, however, represents a different kind of parody that changes the music along with the lyrics and visuals, using musical aesthetics to critique the musical aesthetics of its chosen target. I was struck by the song's explicit and straightforward critique of 'manufactured' pop aesthetics—the kind of critique that is rarely found in academic or critical discourse on music. With some notable exceptions—such as the edited volume *Bad Music: The Music We Love to Hate* and Carl Wilson's *Let's Talk About Love: Why Other People Have Such Bad Taste*—scholars and critics do not tend to focus on musical aesthetics which they do not consider to be valuable.[4] Encountering 'How to Write a Love Song' prompted me to search for other parodies that were structurally similar, seeking answers to a series of preliminary questions: how many such parodies which use music to satirise music exist? Who is producing them? What kind of pop music do they target, and how successful is their critique? What do they reveal about cultural attitudes towards different types of mainstream pop, in terms of their aesthetics, fans, and the critical discourse surrounding them?

The playfully ridiculing attitude of 'How to Write a Love Song' stood out within the sphere of pop music criticism. In the past decade popular music studies and journalism have witnessed a shift away from modernist narratives and towards a pluralist 'poptimism' that embraces mainstream pop along with all other kinds of music. The tension between commercialism on the one hand, and what has become known as authenticity on the other, has constituted the key backdrop for debates on popular music since the advent of popular music criticism. Theodor Adorno's scathing critiques from the 1930s and 40s, which observe how popular music's aesthetic structure mirrors its

[2] The Axis of Awesome, *How To Write A Love Song | Music Videos | Axis Of Awesome*, 2012, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L2cfxv8Pq-Q.
[3] The music videos produced by 'Weird Al' Yankovic exemplify this type of parody song.
[4] Christopher Washburne and Maiken Derno, eds., *Bad Music: The Music We Love to Hate* (New York; London: Routledge, 2004); Carl Wilson, *Let's Talk about Love: Why Other People Have Such Bad Taste* (New York; London: Bloomsbury, 2014).

status as a consumer product in the capitalist marketplace, represent an early configuration of this debate.[5] Since the turn of the new millennium, however, the notion that some types of music should be received as more 'authentic' than other kinds has come to be regarded with suspicion.[6] Yet this parody song and other case studies in the thesis that critique specific formats of mainstream pop music suggest that debates surrounding authenticity—which hinge on the perceived tension between creativity and commercialism—are in fact still present in pop music.

This thesis presents a new lens through which to examine this debate. By assessing mainstream pop from the perspective of parody songs, I explore how this tension between commercialism and creativity in pop is conceptualised in the under-researched format of musical parody. In particular, I examine how this debate intersects with the politics of difference—especially race and gender—and contemporary capitalism. During the course of this research, I found that most of the producers of the parody songs that target the aesthetics of mainstream pop are white and male. This fact brought up inevitable questions regarding the politics of difference, and its relationship with anti-capitalist critique. The thesis shows not only how pop parody a useful tool that highlights the politics of pop music, but also that the parody songs themselves are key sites for the working of ideology, particularly relating to capitalism and the politics of difference.

This thesis is about parody artists who mock the mainstream. It is also about the mainstream music that is mocked. My conception of what constitutes 'mainstream' pop music is discussed in Chapter 1. The tension between 'mainstream' and 'periphery', as it intersects with race, power, and privilege in pop music, is an important theme throughout the thesis. While the thesis is one of the first studies to engage with parodic pop music which satirises musical aesthetics, it does not provide a comprehensive overview of pop parody—although the taxonomy of musical comedy and parody in Chapter 1 goes some way to achieving this. Rather, it focuses on a small number of parody case studies in order to shed light on issues relating to pop music and politics. The thesis, then, is concerned not only with parody, but with the intersection of parody, politics, and pop. Politics here is defined broadly, but I focus particularly on the politics of capitalism, race, gender, and class, and the intersections between these.

In the survey of musical parody set out in Chapter 1, I explain the reasons for focusing mainly on a specific kind of pop parody which satirises musical aesthetics. In

[5] See Theodor W. Adorno, 'On Popular Music' (with the assistance of George Simpson), in *Essays on Music*, ed. Richard D. Leppert (Berkeley, Calif.; London: University of California Press, 2002), 437–69; 'On Jazz', in idem., 470–95; 'On the Fetish-Character in Music and the Regression of Listening', in idem., 288–317; 'On the Social Situation of Music', in idem., 391–436.

[6] In 2000, Georgina Born and David Hesmondhalgh declared that authenticity 'has been consigned to the intellectual dust-heap'. Georgina Born and David Hesmondhalgh, *Western Music and Its Others: Difference, Representation, and Appropriation in Music* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 30.

the present section I set out several other factors determining the limitations of the case studies. Constraints of space and language barriers mean that I focus almost exclusively on English-speaking artists. These include parody artists working in the USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and (to a lesser extent) the UK. Most of the pop music targeted by the parody artists, however, is produced in the USA. Since many of the parodies in the thesis take aim at mainstream pop music, a US-centric focus is perhaps inevitable, as this country has dominated the production of what we in the West have come to consider mainstream pop music. Almost all the songs analysed in the thesis are produced in the twenty-first century, many of them since the advent of YouTube in 2005. The internet, and particularly YouTube, constituted a major research tool for finding parody case studies and the songs they target. YouTube houses a spectacularly wide range of resources, including historical recordings of Tom Lehrer's performances of satirical songs from the 1960s. Nevertheless, there will inevitably exist further parody songs which have not found their way online, or which have not been recorded for posterity. Such songs are absent from my thesis due to its online focus.

The thesis is built around five key parody case studies. Along with 'How to Write a Love Song', I focus particularly on 'Think About It' (2007) by Flight of the Conchords (hereafter 'The Conchords'); 'Title of the Song' (2000) by Da Vinci's Notebook; and 'Pop Song' (2010) and 'Radio Friendly Song' (2009), both by Jon Lajoie. These parody songs use musical aesthetics to satirically poke fun at the music of a chosen genre, while their lyrics self-reflexively comment on this critique. The songs constitute the starting point for all the research contained in the thesis, which sometimes strays relatively far away from the main case studies. In Chapter 2, the parodic target of 'Think About It' (Marvin Gaye's 'What's Going On') prompts a detailed analysis of capitalism and political protest in Motown music. This is followed by the companion Chapter 3 on cultural appropriation in hip hop music—both sincere and parodic—which is prompted by a consideration of racial dynamics in The Conchords' songs and television show. The parody songs in Chapter 5 that target boy band music are contextualised in the preceding Chapter 4, which focuses on the production, aesthetics, and reception of boy band pop. The parody case studies thus function as springboards from which the thesis leaps into debates on the politics of pop music. Such debates often include analysis of secondary musical case studies, including musical parody and comedy from The Lonely Island, Weird Al Yankovic, Lil Dicky, and Rachel Bloom, as well as sincere (non-parodic) popular music by artists as diverse as Eminem, Justin Timberlake, and the Backstreet Boys.

The thesis attempts to answer several key questions. First, I explore how pop parody functions on a structural level. How does pop parody contribute to our understanding of the structure of parody, in music and in other artistic disciplines? What do the parody

songs analysed in this thesis aim to achieve, and how successfully do they meet those aims? The parody songs and the music that they target invite us to consider the relationship between musical aesthetics and the wider socio-cultural sphere. How do the parodies use musical aesthetics to forge a critique of socio-economic structures? For example, several of the parody songs attempt to critique capitalism through a satirisation of pop music aesthetics, with varying levels of success. I also explore the music targeted by these parodies, in particular Motown and boy band music. How do these musical formats operate within capitalist structures?

How does pop parody negotiate the obstacles that hinder parody's critical potential, such as Slavoj Žižek's theory of cynical distance?[7] This theory (which is outlined later in this Introduction) posits that in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, a mode of self-reflexive knowingness, as demonstrated in many of the parody songs analysed, is insufficient to constitute socio-political critique. The varying critical attitudes of each case study analysed in the thesis supports Linda Hutcheon's assertion that parody can espouse a range of positions towards its target, from playfully loving to intensely ridiculing.[8] Relating to these themes, I consider how parody negotiates and sometimes perpetuates binaries of knowingness/ignorance, insider/outsider, and mainstream/periphery.

Crucially, several questions that inform the direction of this research relate to the politics of difference. Who produces these self-reflexive parodic critiques of mainstream pop? What do the demographics—gender, race, sexuality, and ability—of the parody producers and their targets tell us about attitudes towards mainstream pop? I extend these questions of identity and difference to the music targeted by the parody songs as well. I find that the parody songs that self-reflexively satirise the aesthetics of mainstream pop are mainly produced by white men, yet they frequently poke fun at traditionally black genres—R&B, Motown—and boy band music, a format associated with women and gay men. How does this affect the power dynamics which operate in popular music and in wider society? What does it signify that a large proportion of the relatively small number of extant songs which self-reflexively critique popular music aesthetics choose boy band music as their target? Perhaps the cultural status of boy band music renders it the easiest format to target when critiquing popular music aesthetics—thus giving it the function of a straw man. I conclude that the politics of difference plays a crucial role in determining who produces satirical critiques of pop, and what kind of music these producers choose to target. Critiques of mainstream pop aesthetics by male parodists tend to perpetuate the Adornian stance that uncompromisingly blames mainstream and especially 'manufactured' pop for its complicity with capitalism.

[7] Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London; New York: Verso, 1989), 25–26.
[8] Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000), xii.

The layered structure of parody—in engaging with the original targeted artefact through a critique of that artefact—means that it can reveal two different, and often opposing—positions at once. It thus offers multiple perspectives on a debate or problem. Parody's inherently self-reflexive structure renders it particularly effective in revealing the respective positions of knowingness/ignorance that function within debates on the aesthetics and social structure of pop music. The thesis a whole—and especially Chapter 5—demonstrates how pop parody provides a new angle from which we consider debates about 'good/bad', 'critical/uncritical', and 'mainstream/alternative' music.

## 0.1 Method

In order to answer the research questions outlined above, I draw on several theoretical traditions, including Marxism, feminism, and critical race theory. In examining the parodic case studies I use theory on parody and satire, mainly by literary theorists such as Hutcheon, Simon Dentith, and J. Riewald.[9] This Method section first sets out a definition of parody (and satire) for the purpose of this thesis. This is followed by a discussion of Žižek's theory of cynical distance, which is particularly relevant for my analysis of the critical function of parody. The expositions on parody, satire, and cynical distance are substantially longer than those that follow, on Marxism, feminism, race, and music analysis. I assume that the reader will be less familiar with theory on parody, satire, and cynical distance than she is with feminism and critical race theory. I thus present a more detailed discussion on the former sets of theory. Finally, I introduce the split between knowingness and ignorance as an important theoretical concept that inflicts the thesis throughout.

### 0.1.1 Defining Parody

What do we mean by parody, and specifically pop parody? Over the next few pages I set out a working definition of parody for the purpose of this thesis. I focus particularly on parody's capacity for socio-political critique, and its relationship with two neighbouring forms of semantic ambiguity, satire and pastiche. Linda Hutcheon's definition of parody as 'a form of repetition with ironic critical distance, marking difference rather than similarity' is useful in that it allows for parody to adopt a broad spectrum of critical attitudes.[10] The force of critique contained in the 'ironic critical distance' may vary from strong to weak. Indeed, Hutcheon notes that parody's attitude towards the original text can range from 'respectful to playful to scathingly critical'.[11]

[9] Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody*; Simon Dentith, *Parody* (London; New York: Routledge, 2000); J. Riewald, 'Parody as Criticism', *11061hilologus* 50, no. 1 (1966): 125–148.
[10] Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody*, xii.
[11] Ibid., xii.

Parody and satire are closely related, and are often conflated. This happens in part because parody is frequently a vehicle for satire. The crucial structural difference between the two is that parody must always involve repetition, by which it takes the form of the subject it targets, whereas satire does not need to adopt the same form it critiques. For this reason, parody can be satirical—and indeed is generally satirical—but satire is not always parodic. Political satire, for example, can be expressed through parody, such as when the comedian Tina Fey imitated the 2008 Republican vice-presidential candidate Sarah Palin in a series of sketches on *Saturday Night Live*.[12] These sketches constitute parody, because they involve a direct imitation of the same form, which is public speaking: Fey performs an exaggerated repetition of the physical appearance, style of speech and gestures as Palin at a press conference. A satirical news article that mocks Palin and her style of public speaking, in contrast, constitutes satire but not parody because it does not imitate the form of the original: writing is a different form to speaking. Both of these examples constitute satire, but only the Fey imitation is parody. Parodic pop music, meanwhile, critiques music through music. A satirical *Onion* article making fun of twenty-first century pop music may have the same critical force and line of attack as a satirical pop song, but it does not constitute parody because it uses a different medium—writing—to critique music.[13]

Since parody involves this formal repetition, it is able to clearly critique aesthetic aspects of the original target. Satire, in contrast, as Penny Spirou observes, 'highlights social aspects', because it does not have this capacity for aesthetic repetition. Compared with parody, satire is often more aggressive in its critique. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines satire as a 'work of art which uses humour, irony, exaggeration, or ridicule to expose and criticise prevailing immorality or foolishness, esp. as a form of social or political commentary'.[14] The dictionary's definition for 'parody', in contrast, emphasises exaggeration and imitation, rather than political critique.[15] Peifer notes that 'in contrast with satire's playful—yet—aggressive judgements, parody is not necessarily critical at its core',[16] while George Test considers satire to always contains an element of 'attack or aggression' alongside 'humour, play, and judgment'.[17] Parody, in contrast, as Dentith observes, 'has always been liable to oscillate into and out of the critical attitude'.[18]

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[12] See for example Saturday Night Live, *Sarah Palin and Hillary Address the Nation - SNL*, accessed 10 October 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vSOLz1YBFG0&t=1s.
[13] 'How To Become An Internet Music Sensation', *The Onion*, 14 March 2011, https://www.theonion.com/how-to-become-an-internet-music-sensation-1819590199.
[14] 'Satire, N.', OED Online (Oxford University Press), accessed 5 November 2017, http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/171207.
[15] 'Parody, n.2', OED Online (Oxford University Press), accessed 5 November 2017, http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/138059.
[16] Penny Spirou, 'The Lonely Island's "SNL Digital Short" as Music Video Parody: Building on Saturday Night Live's Legacy', in Giuffre and Hayward, *Music in Comedy Television*, 130–31.
[17] George A. Test, *Satire: Spirit and Art* (Tampa: University of South Florida Press, 1991), x.
[18] Dentith, *Parody*, 185.

Parody must also be distinguished from that other form of semantic ambiguity, pastiche.[19] While both parody and pastiche involve repetition, the latter contains no critical element, and often little humour. Spirou observes that 'parody draws attention to the text that it mocks, but does not solely imitate it, like a pastiche would. Parody provides commentary on the text by replicating certain aspects yet injecting new elements'.[20] We can thus suggest that pastiche constitutes parody without the satirical impulse. Pastiche involves repetition where the critical distance between the original and the pastiche is very close or non-existent.[21] In its strength of critical bite, then, parody falls somewhere in between satire and pastiche.

Because of its essential imitative nature, parody can work to affirm the original text even while ridiculing it. Both Hutcheon and Dentith have observed this apparent contradiction within parodic forms. The former notes 'the tension between the potentially conservative effect of repetition and the potentially revolutionary impact of difference', while the latter points out that 'the parodic paradox, by which parody creates new utterances out of the utterances that it seeks to mock, means that it preserves as much as it destroys'.[22] Hutcheon reminds us that the prefix 'para' means that the work of parody always stands alongside the original text as well as partially in opposition to it.[23] Julian Johnson makes a similar observation with regards to Mahler's semantic ambiguity: 'the peculiar character of Mahler's musical irony is that the affirmation of the ideal of authentic expression and the self-mockery of that ideal appear side-by-side'.[24] The literary scholar J. Reiwald takes this idea even further in his assertion that parody should be interpreted as a gesture of admiration, rather than critique:

> The parodist should be able to combine admiration with laughter. Most good parodies happen to be written out of admiration rather than distaste or contempt [ … ] the compliment of real parody consists in the attention given to the parodied work. One might even say that it is almost impossible for the parodist to make the mimetic effort unless he has enough sympathy, or at least empathy, to 'identify' himself with the parodee's work. In fact, some of the best English parodies spring from a generous appreciation which is akin to love. Accordingly the most successful parodies are generally of those writers whom the parodist admires and whose genius he expects his

[19] 'Semantic ambiguity', is a term used by Esti Sheinberg to describe the often overlapping categories of satire, irony, parody, and pastiche. Sheinberg writes, 'irony, parody, satire and the grotesque all use two or more layers of meaning, and therefore they can all be regarded as manifestations of semantic ambiguity'. Esti Sheinberg, *Irony, Satire, Parody and the Grotesque in the Music of Shostakovich: A Theory of Musical Incongruities* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000), 27.
[20] Spirou, 'The Lonely Island's "SNL Digital Short" as Music Video Parody', 130–31.
[21] On pastiche in pop music, see Christopher Joseph Tonelli, 'Musical Pastiche, Embodiment, and Intersubjectivity: Listening in the Second Degree' (University of California, San Diego, 2011).
[22] Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody,* xii; Dentith, *Parody,* 189.
[23] Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody,* 32.
[24] Julian Johnson, 'Irony', in *Aesthetics of Music: Musicological Perspectives*, ed. Stephen C. Downes (New York: Routledge, 2014), 249. As will become clear in later chapters, many of the pop parodies analysed serve to affirm the original text even while they critique it.

> reader, too, to revere. It is just because of this blend of reverence and mockery that parodees have been able to join in the laugh occasioned by their parodists, and that, with very few exceptions, the greatest modern parodists have made no enemies.[25]

Riewald's comment here is akin to the notion that imitation is the sincerest form of flattery. Although he observes that parody is 'usually written without malice', he notes that the content and style of the original work 'are exaggerated in such a way as to lead to an implicit value judgment of the original'.[26] From his earlier quotation, however, we can infer that this value judgement need not necessarily be negative. The parody songs of 'Weird Al' Yankovic illustrate the assertion that parody can constitute respectful homage. While Yankovic's songs definitely constitute parody rather than pastiche, they are generally more playful than scornful, containing a low level of satirical bite towards the original song. Their affectionate nature is indicated by the way in which 'serious' pop artists, such as James Blunt, encourage Yankovic's parodying their music. When Blunt's record label refused Yankovic the rights to his hit song 'You're Beautiful', Blunt donated them free of charge so that his song could be parodied by the comedian. If the objects of critique accept and even encourage the parody, it follows that the intended critical punch of the parody will be less powerful.

Dentith observes that 'distinctions need to be preserved among the parodic practices of popular culture. Some of this parody is sharply directed at deflating self-importance, and is politically and socially pointed and telling. Other parody, meanwhile, is done simply for the fun of it. There is no general politics of parody; you cannot decide in advance whether it seeks to contain the new or to deflate the old'.[27] Another possibility is that parody serves to uphold the old by functioning as a kind of fifth column. By poking fun at something 'bad', it allows the audiences to think that the 'bad' thing is not so awful after all, because it allows the critique. In addition to this, the enjoyment afforded by the parody might suggest to the audience that the 'bad' thing is not so bad even on its own term. The parody thus functions as little more than an advertisement for its object, posing as something making fun of it.

To summarise, parody, satire, and pastiche differ from one another in terms of both formal structure and critical attitude. Parody and pastiche take the same form of the original (they use music to target music), whereas satire can take a different form to that of the original (it might use writing to critique music). 'Parody' can encompass a wide range of critical attitudes, and some parodic works are more satirical than others. When evaluating pop parody, we might therefore consider the following questions: to what extent is the parody satirical, and how critical is the satire? To what extent does the

[25] Riewald, 'Parody as Criticism', 128.
[26] Ibid., 128-29.
[27] Dentith, *Parody*, 185.

parody's affirmative function compromise its potential for critique? The breadth of possible interpretations regarding the critical potential of parody is reflected in the diverse attitudes of the case studies in my thesis. While all the songs are parodic, they range in critical stance from those which are playful and relatively harmless, with a generous attitude towards their original model, to those which mercilessly ridicule and attack their object. Needless to say, the answers to these questions are not always straightforward, and will differ depending on the interpretation of each individual audience member. At various points throughout the thesis, I refer to some of the parody songs as satirical songs. In such cases, these labels can be used interchangeably, since the particular songs are both satirical and parodic.

### 0.1.2 Cynical Distance

Several commentators have observed that the relative ubiquity of satire today compared with past eras means that satire has lost its critical bite. The sociologist Stephen Wagg writes about the daring and provocative 'satire boom' in early 1960s Britain, prompted by acts such as the Edinburgh revue Beyond the Fringe (which included musical pieces), which, it has been reported, was received with shock by audiences and critics because they were not used to witnessing politicians (including Harold Macmillan, the prime minister of the time) being openly lampooned on stage.[28] The mainstreaming of satire in the decades that followed is partly explained by the rise of television. Tom Lehrer, a musical comedian who performed satirical popular songs (often of a political nature) in the 1950s and 60s, suggested that satire's transferral to the televisual medium coincided with a dulling of its critical bite; it is more difficult for comedians on television to make jokes that display political partisanship, since it puts them at risk of alienating half the audience.[29] Nowadays, in order to be successful, comedians must appeal to the masses. Satire has become yet more prevalent in the age of the internet; popular platforms include online satirical news sites such as *The Onion* and *The Daily Mash,* and the video streaming site YouTube, which features many satirical videos. In the present day, the use of satire to critique contemporary politics and culture is thus firmly established in the mainstream media consciousness. As Wagg noted in 2002, 'what became known as "satire" has become deeply woven into public discourse'.[30] Satire is prevalent in not only fringe but also mainstream media,

[28] Stephen Wagg, 'Comedy, Politics and Permissiveness: The "Satire Boom'' and Its Inheritance"'. *Contemporary Politics* 8, no. 4 (2002); Humphrey Carpenter, *That Was Satire That Was: Beyond the Fringe, the Establishment Club, Private Eye and That Was the Week That Was* (London: Victor Gollancz, 2000). It should be noted that political satire as performance was already established in the USA in the 1950s, and Beyond the Fringe was influenced by the stand-up routines of Mort Sahl and Lenny Bruce in San Francisco's hungry i club in the early years of this decade. Wagg, 'Comedy, Politics and Permissiveness', 320.
[29] 'Stop Clapping, This Is Serious', *The Sydney Morning Herald,* 1 March 2003, http://www.smh.com.au/articles/2003/02/28/1046407753895.html.
[30] Wagg, 'Comedy, Politics and Permissiveness', 324.

from broadsheet newspapers such as *The Guardian* to popular television programmes such as *Saturday Night Live* in the USA.[31] It can be argued that the over-use of satire means that it no longer has the provocative effect on society that it perhaps once did. This has been bemoaned by the comedian John Bird (who performed in the satirical television show *Bremner, Bird and Fortune*), who observed towards the turn of the twenty-first century that 'everybody is a comedian. Everything is subversive. And I find that very tiresome'.[32] Umberto Eco has remarked that the pervasiveness of irony in our current society means that even to say 'I love you' can no longer be sincere; rather, it is always in inverted commas.[33] In the current age, in which obsessive self-reflexivity and ironic distance have almost become the de facto subjective stance, can satire any longer be a valid mode of critique—if it ever was, that is?

Žižek does not think so. He is profoundly skeptical of the resistant potential of ironic or satirical utterances. Hutcheon observes a tension in parody between the potentially conservative act of repetition and the potentially progressive stance of critical distance. The work of Žižek, among other theorists, however, calls into question the impact of this critical distance, so that even the ostensibly progressive aspect of parody is seen to shed its resistant potential.[34] He argues that the level of self-reflexivity possessed by the postmodern subject means that they are continually aware of ideology's function in society, and thus adopt a de facto stance of ironic distance. In an updated interpretation of Marx's passing remark on the control ideology has over people, namely that 'they do not know it, but they are doing it',[35] Žižek notes that

> now, on the other hand […] Peter Sloterdijk puts forward the thesis that ideology's dominant mode of functioning is cynical, which renders impossible—or, more precisely, vain—the classic critical-ideological procedure. The cynical subject is quite aware of the distance between the ideological mask and the social reality, but he none the less still insists upon the mask. The formula, as proposed by Sloterdijk, would then be: 'they know very well what they are doing, but still, they are doing it'. Cynical reason is no longer naive, but is a paradox of an enlightened false consciousness: one knows the falsehood very well, one is well aware of a particular interest hidden behind an ideological universality, but still one does not renounce it.[36]

[31] This is only the case in the liberal democratic West, however; in many countries that are ruled by more conservative or totalitarian regimes, political satire may not be tolerated.
[32] Quoted in Carpenter, *That Was Satire That Was*, 329.
[33] Quoted in Daniel R. White and Gert Hellerich, *Labyrinths of the Mind: The Self in the Postmodern Age* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), 65.
[34] Žižek uses the term 'cynical distance', which I suggest is akin to Hutcheon's 'critical distance' in her theory of parody. See Žižek, *The Sublime Object*, 25–26.
[35] In the Wordsworth edition of Marx's *Capital* this remark is translated as 'we are not aware of this, nevertheless we do it'. Karl Marx, *Capital*, trans. Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling, vol. 1 (Ware, Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions, 2013), 49.
[36] Žižek, *The Sublime Object*, 25–26.

In the postmodern era, there exist many people who are perfectly aware of the neoliberal ideology that dominates society. Further to this, they understand that such ideology is an illusion. The ideological mask of late capitalism promotes the idea that this is not only the most preferable but the only plausible system, and that it produces (for example) the highest possible living standards for all. Yet even if a person knows that this is false, they do nothing to shatter the illusion, and continue to act as if they subscribe to the ideology. Because they are constantly aware of ideology's functioning in society, when they perform a deliberate act of irony with the intent of subverting the system, its effect is diluted, since they adopt a continual position of ironic distance anyway. This implies that on the surface, at least, there is no longer a distinction between critiquing a thing by ironically imitating it and simply doing the thing. Terry Eagleton touches on this idea when he suggests that ideology is inscribed in what we *do,* more than what we say.[37] As Žižek concludes, 'cynical distance is one […] way to blind ourselves to the structuring power of ideological fantasy: even if we do not take things seriously, even if we keep an ironical distance, *we are still doing them*'.[38]

Žižek's theory supports the idea that the ubiquity of satire in the present day has caused a blunting of its critical edge. An attitude of cynical distance is now so common among subjects that it has become unremarkable, and almost meaningless. The saturation of political satire in the current era illustrates that many subjects possess a high level of self-reflexivity; yet despite this, the political regimes that are critiqued are largely allowed to carry on as normal. Ironic and satirical utterances are meaningless if they are not reflected in one's actions.

Žižek, however, goes a step further, in asserting that not only does ironic distance do little to alleviate the present political situation, but that it actually serves to bolster the dominance of ideology. He suggests that laughing at satire in today's society constitutes an act not of political subversion, but of affirmation:

> Ideology is not constituted by abstract propositions in themselves, rather, ideology is itself this very texture of the lifeworld which 'schematises' the propositions, rendering them 'livable' […] Which is why, if there is an ideological experience at its purest, at its zero-level, then it occurs the moment we adopt an attitude of ironic distance, laughing at the follies in which we are ready to believe—it is at this moment of liberating laughter,

[37] 'If ideology is illusion, then it is an illusion which structures our social practices; and to this extent "falsity" lies on the side of what we do, not necessarily of what we say. The capitalist who has devoured all three volumes of *Capital* knows exactly what he is doing; but he continues to behave as though he did not, because his activity is caught up in the 'objective' fantasy of commodity fetishism [...] Ideology, in other words, [is] not just a matter of what I think about a situation; it is somehow inscribed in that situation itself. It is no good my reminding myself that I am opposed to racism as I sit down on a park bench marked "Whites Only"; by the acting of sitting on it, I have supported and perpetuated racist ideology. The ideology, so to speak, is in the bench, not in my head'. Terry Eagleton, *Ideology: An Introduction* (London: Verso, 1991), 39–40.
[38] Žižek, *The Sublime Object,* 30.

> when we look down on the absurdity of our faith, that we become pure subjects of ideology, that ideology exerts its strongest hold over us.[39]

By this account, adopting a position of ironic distance is a necessary strategy for survival that enables us to cope with the unequal and oppressive conditions of the late capitalist system in which we live, thus confirming our complicity with that very system. Laughing at political satire in *Private Eye* magazine or a musical parody that targets the aesthetics of mainstream pop may well feel like a liberating experience, since we are ostensibly complicit in the act of undermining the system. Yet in fact it is at this very moment that our position within the system is most wholeheartedly cemented. These small gestures of liberation must be permitted if capitalism is to thrive; it is only in the case that it refused to tolerate them that radical protest might occur. Žižek confesses the influence of Oscar Wilde's 1891 essay 'The Soul of Man Under Socialism', which argues that charity does more harm than good because, far from changing the fundamental evils of society, it alleviates the suffering of the victims of the system just enough so that their situation is bearable, and thus allowed to continue. Wilde suggests that rather than trying 'to solve the problem of poverty, for instance, by keeping the poor alive; or, in the case of a very advanced school, by amusing the poor', we should 'try and reconstruct society on such a basis that poverty will be impossible'.[40] By a similar logic, we should aim to build a society that has no use for political satire: a society which works so effectively for the common good, that it would be impossible to submit it to mockery.[41] The permissiveness of irony and satire functions to give the illusion of resistance on the part of the subject, when really it works only to placate the subject, making it less likely that she will revolt. In this way, satire works for the benefit of the ruling class, not the ordinary citizen.

Observations by Griffin reinforce Žižek's assertion that 'liberating laughter' and ironic distance function to give dissatisfied citizens a safe outlet for their grievances:

> From the point of view of rulers, such compensatory satire would not be threatening. Indeed, since it would tend to keep the underdogs contented, it might be seen as a means of political control, a harmless way to allow the venting of dangerous steam. Monarchic governments, said Montesquieu, tolerate satire or impose only limited penalties so as to 'give the people patience to suffer' and indeed to 'laugh at their suffering'. If the licensed disruptions and misrule of pre-Lenten carnival, the medieval Feast of Fools, and the Ass's

[39] Slavoj Žižek, *Living in the End Times* (London; New York: Verso, 2010), 3–4.
[40] Oscar Wilde, *The Soul of Man Under Socialism* (London: Black House Publishing Ltd, 2012), 25–26. Wilde continues, 'Just as the worst slave-owners were those who were kind to their slaves, and so prevented the horror of the system being realised by those who suffered from it, and understood by those who contemplated it, so, in the present state of things in England, the people who do most harm are the people who try to do most good […] Charity creates a multitude of sins'.
[41] Needless to say, such a society could never actually exist; but this is not sufficient reason to argue that we should not strive to create the closest approximation to it as possible.

> Mass serve finally to reinforce communal norms and established authority, perhaps we should view political satire as a similar kind of safety valve.[42]

This notion that satire can work to affirm, rather than resist, the existing political situation was demonstrated in the months leading up to the 2016 American presidential election. During this time the media were saturated with satirical attacks on Donald Trump—by comedians, journalists, and panel show hosts, among others. Some of the most widely circulated of such critiques included the series of sketches on the television comedy show *Saturday Night Live* that mocked the election campaign (the actor Alec Baldwin impersonated Trump, while the comedian Kate McKinnon played his Democrat rival Hillary Clinton).[43] These sketches highlighted Trump's worst qualities: his racism, sexism and ableism; his bullying instincts; his lack of moral compass; and his incompetence. Nevertheless, the exaggerated, humorous portrayal of Trump's most unpleasant characteristics in a liberal environment such as *Saturday Night Live* (where it is fairly safe to assume that the majority of the audience and cast members voted against Trump) served to produce laughter that was comfortable and cathartic. For members of the public who felt angry with Trump, such light relief in the form of funny, satirical sketches that came from a critical perspective with which they agreed, constituted an outlet to deflect this anger—an antidote to cope with the atrocities committed by this figure in the political sphere. Turning Trump into a laughing stock went some way to redeeming him, because it gave even those who hated everything about the real-life Trump a cause to think that his existence has at least produced one good thing: fuel for comedic entertainment. The *Saturday Night Live* sketches served to normalise Trump, making him digestible for a liberal audience in an acceptable format. That Trump was portrayed by a widely recognised and well-loved actor, Alec Baldwin, may have even served to make the politician appear less hideous and more relatable than his real-life self. If the audience finds the undiluted real-life version of Trump difficult to cope with, they may consider this Trump/Baldwin amalgamation to be marginally more palatable. The satirical sketches thus functioned to bring Trump from outside the sphere of what is normally acceptable in society—from the excess of the Real, which is where he properly belongs—into the safe, comfortable realm of liberal society, in which Baldwin and *Saturday Night Live* fans reside. This illustrates the trap that much political satire is in danger of falling into: that making fun of something abhorrent or absurd actually serves to normalise it. Rather than taking action against figures or phenomena that, like

[42] Dustin Griffin, *Satire: A Critical Reintroduction* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2015), 156.
[43] *Saturday Night Live*'s parody of the first presidential debate had 24 million views on YouTube at the time of writing. The video is available at Saturday Night Live, *Donald Trump vs. Hillary Clinton Debate Cold Open - SNL*, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-nQGBZQrtT0.

Trump, are clearly ideologically corrupt, we simply laugh at them, and any hope for effective resistance is scuppered.[44]

The musical comedian Tom Lehrer has noted this problem of the audience of satire feeling too comfortable to want to pursue any kind of political reform. He observed that 'the audience usually has to be with you, I'm afraid. I always regarded myself as not even preaching to the converted, I was titillating the converted […] The audiences like to think that satire is doing something. But, in fact, it is mostly to leave themselves satisfied. Satisfied rather than angry, which is what they should be'.[45] Political reform, argues Lehrer, does not come from citizens feeling satisfied. This was illustrated in the *Saturday Night Live* sketches that satirised Trump in the months preceding the 2016 election.[46] Several other observations by Lehrer highlight the fraught nature of the marriage between comedy and political critique. Lehrer quotes his fellow comedian Peter Cook, who in 1961 founded the Establishment Club, an important performance venue for satirical comedians. In a tongue-in-cheek comment, Cook said the club was modelled on 'those wonderful Berlin cabarets which did so much to stop the rise of Hitler and prevent the outbreak of the Second World War'.[47] These comedians were thus acutely aware of satire's limitations in influencing the political sphere.

Lehrer considers satire's impact to have become especially blunted towards the end of his musical career in the early 1970s, which signalled the beginning of the neoliberal era. From this time onwards, the events of the political sphere took such an appalling turn that reality had almost become a satire of itself. Lehrer observes that 'political satire became obsolete when Henry Kissinger was awarded the Nobel Prize […] everything is so weird in politics that it's very hard to be funny about it, I think'.[48] Kissinger was awarded the prize in 1973 for his peace work in South Vietnam, yet many objected to the decision (including two members of the Nobel Committee, who resigned in protest), on the grounds that peace had not actually been achieved in the area, and that Kissinger was suspected of having committed a war crime in his involvement in America's secret

[44] Since Trump entered the White House in January 2017, some satirical critiques of the President and his administration have continued to have this effect of rendering political atrocities more palatable for a liberal viewing public. *Saturday Night Live* sketches that portrayed Trump's close aide, the white supremacist sympathiser Steve Bannon, as a cloaked, skeletal Grim Reaper, served to bring these reprehensible political figures into a safe, pantomime-like environment, thus normalising the evils of society. See Saturday Night Live, *Oval Office Cold Open - SNL*, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pZOF9q5fzfs.

[45] 'Stop Clapping, This Is Serious'.

[46] As Žižek points out, 'when we are shown scenes of starving children in Africa, with a call for us to do something to help them, the underlying ideological message is something like: "Don't think, don't politicise, forget about the true causes of their poverty, just act, contribute money, so that you will not have to think!' Žižek, *Living in the End Times*, 4. It is possible that some of the parodies discussed in this thesis have a similar effect on the listener. In The Conchords' 'Think About It', when the group sing, 'What is wrong with the world today?/You gotta think about it' this is actually an injunction *not* to think about it, but to instead consume the product of humorous satirical pop songs, and all will be well.

[47] 'Stop Clapping, This Is Serious'.

[48] Stephen Thompson, 'Interview: Tom Lehrer', *The A.V. Club*, 24 May 2000, https://www.avclub.com/tom-lehrer-1798208112.

bombing of Cambodia.[49] The awarding of the Nobel Prize to Kissinger thus played out like an ironic gesture—yet it was, in fact, an act of sincerity. This signified that we had reached an age in which the line between satirical critique of the system and the system itself had grown so thin as to be barely noticeable. Lehrer's comments suggest that that after the mid-seventies, the global political situation became so dire, and political protest appeared to be so futile, that things simply weren't funny any more; laughter was no longer the appropriate response to such events. Wagg has noted that, after Kissinger, 'political reality could now outrun any conceivable parody'.[50] This is more apparent than ever in an age which has produced a politician such as Trump, whose actions are often more extreme, exaggerated—and sometimes, frankly, unbelievable—than any satirical critique.

Throughout the thesis, Žižek's theory of cynical distance constitutes a starting point for discussions regarding knowingness and the politics of difference in the parody songs and the pop music that they target. I consider how the self-reflexive knowingness of the parody artist intersects with race, gender, sexuality, and class. Žižek's theory is amended and developed upon according to the findings of the case studies. In its multiple layers of self-reflexivity, The Conchords' 'Think About It' goes beyond Žižek's theory of cynical distance in order to negotiate the problem of the futility of ironic critique under late capitalism. In Chapter 3 I demonstrate how self-reflexivity alone is insufficient in tackling the problem of cultural appropriation in pop music and parody. Throughout the thesis theory and case studies enjoy a reciprocal relationship: rather than simply applying theory to the case studies in order to uncover meaning, I use the findings of the case studies to look back at the theory and—sometimes—challenge or develop it. Theory is thus approached as a tool rather than an end point in itself.

### 0.1.3 Marxism

Adorno is another important Marxist theorist whose presence is felt throughout the thesis. Although I rarely engage with his writing directly, Adorno's intellectual project-most notably, his damning indictment of popular music—influences my framing and analysis of the parody songs and the pop music they target (most notably, Motown and boy band music).[51] My project, however, seeks to neither completely affirm nor overturn Adorno's conclusions. Rather, it aims to complicate them, and consider what they might mean for pop and parody in the twenty-first century. My theoretical approach, then, treads a line between an Adornian critique of mainstream pop and a 'poptimist'

[49] Frank Carson, '10 Most Controversial Nobel Peace Prize Winners', *The Cheat Sheet*, 25 December 2014, http://www.cheatsheet.com/politics/10-most-controversial-nobel-peace-prize-winners.html/?a=viewall#ixzz3c6vyRm6P.
[50] Wagg, 'Comedy, Politics and Permissiveness', 324.
[51] Adorno, 'On Popular Music'; 'On Jazz'; 'On the Fetish-Character in Music and the Regression of Listening'; 'On the Social Situation of Music'.

celebration of it.[52] My analysis aims to maintain sympathy with the consumers of popular culture (a position influenced by Birmingham School theorists such as Stuart Hall) without dismissing the possibility that some music is more aesthetically banal or more complicit with the culture industry than other music—all the while acknowledging the immense difficulty in measuring such things. Holding both of these seemingly opposing theoretical positions in the balance at once was no easy task. Evidence of this difficulty is most notable in my unwillingness to choose a fixed position regarding the value of boy band music in Chapter 4. Other Marxist theorists engaged with throughout the thesis include work by Terry Eagleton and Mark Fisher, and the Marxist musicologists J. P. E. Harper-Scott, Max Paddison, and James Currie.[53] I often use Marxism in conjunction with race and gender theory. For example, Marxism is combined with critical race theory in my analysis of white rappers and cultural appropriation in Chapter 3.

Žižek devotes a hefty portion of his oeuvre to analysing popular cultural artefacts, in particular Hollywood film. That he does so, however, should not lead us to jump to the assumption that he intends to valorise such artefacts. Žižek considers Hollywood film to be an especially important site for ideology critique. He is often very critical of the ideology which pervades the films (such as the rigid class system under capitalism in *Titanic*) and what he considers to be their false promise of emancipation.[54] Rather than dismissing Hollywood film on the grounds that it is ideologically corrupt, however, Žižek asserts the importance of scrutinising such a form in an attempt to better understand the society which produced it. Nor does he deny our enjoyment of such film, even though he judges such enjoyment to be ideologically suspect. I hold a similar attitude towards the parody songs analysed in the thesis. They are sometimes a site of regressive ideology, and I do not necessarily wish to valorise them.

In my exploration of mainstream pop parody and the music that it satirises, I am not particularly interested in validating any particular kind of music on the grounds of its aesthetics. I am more concerned with the critical discourse which surrounds this music, and its implications for wider society. The thesis will reveal that, like Hollywood film, both the parody songs and the 'sincere' pop music that constitutes the parodied object are sometimes loaded with regressive ideology. As with Žižek's reaction to Hollywood film, however, I do not wish to deny the enjoyment that this music provides. We can still enjoy these songs even as we submit them to ideology critique. There is, as

[52] I discuss twenty-first century 'poptimist' ideology' in Chapter 1.
[53] Eagleton, *Ideology*; Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Winchester: O Books, 2009); J. P. E. Harper-Scott, 'Brief Thoughts on Lily Allen', *J. P. E. Harper-Scott* (blog), 4 January 2014, https://jpehs.co.uk/2014/01/04/brief-thoughts-on-lily-allen/; Max Paddison, 'The Critique Criticised: Adorno and Popular Music', *Popular Music* 2 (1982): 201–218; James R. Currie, *Music and the Politics of Negation* (Bloomington; Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2012).
[54] Sophie Fiennes, *The Pervert's Guide to Ideology*, 2013.

far as I can tell, no convincing reason why 'serious' scholarly engagement need be separated from light-hearted enjoyment and even laughter.

### 0.1.4 Feminism

The thesis is firmly rooted in feminist theory. In exploring the politics of difference in parody and pop, I use tools from feminism and queer theory to identify and critique systems of oppression on the basis of gender and sexuality. My feminist analysis is rooted in the theory of second-wave feminists such as Shulamith Firestone, who critiqued patriarchal systems of oppression in society, and Laura Mulvey, whose seminal theory of the 'male gaze' provided a framework for understanding the objectification of women in media and culture.[55] The thesis is also committed to the intersectionality of late twentieth and early twenty-first century feminists including bell hooks and Sara Ahmed.[56] I analyse gender in conjunction with other markers of difference including age, class, ability, sexuality, and race.[57] Continuing the tradition of feminist music studies in critiquing, for example, the gendered language used to describe music and the devaluing of musical styles and forms considered as 'feminine', the thesis is influenced by feminist music scholars including Susan McClary, Sheila Whiteley, Laurie Stras, and Elizabeth LeGuin.[58] With the exception of a parody song featured on the female-created television show *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*, analysed in the Conclusion, most of the musical case studies in the thesis are produced by male artists. Nevertheless, I use feminist tools to dissect these male-produced case studies, most often in a deconstruction of masculinity (which frequently intersects with a deconstruction of whiteness). This project is influenced by critiques of masculinity in music by Freya Jarman-Ivens, Ian Biddle, Sam de Boise, and Stan Hawkins.[59] Feminist and queer theory is a necessary tool to answer the research questions regarding the politics of difference in pop and parody, particularly the question of why the particular kind of pop parody which self-reflexively critiques the aesthetics of mainstream pop is much more common among male artists than female artists.

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[55] Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (New York: Morrow, 1970); Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', *Screen* 16, no. 3 (1 October 1975): 6–18.
[56] bell hooks, *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (Boston: South End Press, 1981); Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017).
[57] Intersectional feminism is used particular in Chapter 4, where I analyse boy band music and its fans.
[58] Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality* (Minneapolis; Oxford: University of Minnesota Press, 1991); Sheila Whiteley, *Too Much Too Young: Popular Music, Age and Gender* (London: Routledge, 2005); Sheila Whiteley, *Sexing the Groove: Popular Music and Gender* (London; New York: Routledge, 1997); Laurie Stras, *She's so Fine: Reflections on Whiteness, Femininity, Adolescence and Class in 1960s Music* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011); Elisabeth LeGuin, 'Uneasy Listening', *Repercussions* 3, no. 1 (Spring 1994).
[59] Freya Jarman-Ivens, ed., *Oh Boy!: Masculinities and Popular Music* (New York: Routledge, 2013); Ian D. Biddle, *Music, Masculinity and the Claims of History: The Austro-German Tradition from Hegel to Freud* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011); Sam de Boise, *Men, Masculinity, Music and Emotions* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015); Stan Hawkins, '[Un]Justified: Gestures of Straight-Talk in Justin Timberlake's Songs', in *Oh Boy!: Masculinities and Popular Music*, ed. Freya Jarman-Ivens, 197–212.

### 0.1.5 Race

Along with feminism, the thesis is firmly grounded in critical race and postcolonial theory. It is necessary to draw on such theory since a significant number of the case studies involve white men parodying black music: Motown, hip hop, and the boy band R&B of Boyz II Men. In any analysis of such music, the racial power dynamics must be carefully considered. Indeed, it can be argued that most studies of Anglophone pop music must include consideration of racial dynamics, since this music is often rooted in black styles. The boy band music discussed in Chapter 4 constitutes an example of a racially hybridised musical format. In the twenty-first century, some popular music is still characterised by white appropriation of black styles and forms. My analysis is rooted in theory of racial power dynamics and cultural appropriation, including work by W. E. B. Du Bois, George Lipsitz, and Dick Hebdige.[60] The parody case studies invite an exploration into the relationship between self-reflexivity and cultural appropriation. Chapter 3 demonstrates how white parodic rappers—often unsuccessfully—use self-reflexivity as a cover to get away with cultural appropriation. The theory of whiteness studies is also instrumental to my analysis. Drawing on the work of Ruth Frankenberg and Ricard Dyer, I approach whiteness as a hegemonic structural force, and an 'unmarked marker' of identity.[61] Particularly in Chapters 2 and 3, I use the tools of whiteness studies to deconstruct the white masculine identity of The Conchords and other rappers (both parodic and sincere). I also examine the relationship between whiteness and the musical mainstream. My analysis of music and race follows on from scholarship by Paul Gilroy, Amiri Baraka, Ronald Radano, and Philip Bohlman.[62] Aside from race, the thesis engages with other manifestations of cultural Otherness such as nationality. In their focus on The Conchords, New Zealanders who migrate to America, Chapters 2 and 3 examine the relationship between race and nationality, and the cultural hegemony of the USA compared to New Zealand.[63]

### 0.1.6 Music Analysis

The thesis uses music analysis to examine the musical aesthetics of the parody songs and the pop music that they target. Much of the analysis is formalist, focusing on structure,

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[60] W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches* (Chicago: A. C. McClurg & Co, 1903); George Lipsitz, *Footsteps in the Dark: The Hidden Histories of Popular Music* (Minneapolis; London: University of Minnesota Press, 2007); Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London; New York: Routledge, 1979).

[61] Ruth Frankenberg, 'Introduction: Local Whitenesses, Localizing Whiteness', in *Displacing Whiteness: Essays in Social and Cultural Criticism*, ed. Ruth Frankenberg (Durham, N.C.; London: Duke University Press, 1997), 15; See also Richard Dyer, *White* (London: Routledge, 1997).

[62] Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London: Verso, 1993); Amiri Baraka, *Blues People* (New York: Morrow, 1963); Ronald Michael Radano and Philip V. Bohlman, eds., *Music and the Racial Imagination* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

[63] See Born and Hesmondhalgh, *Western Music and Its Others*.

melody, harmony, and rhythm. For this I refer to musical scores, several of which I have transcribed from the musical track. The thesis draws on extant analytical studies of pop music, including Dai Griffiths' work on the elevating modulation, and Walter Everett's work on tonality.[64] I use a broadly formalist analytical approach for two reasons. First, the analysis of parody songs is partly directed by the self-referential naming of musical devices in the lyrics of these songs. I was particularly interested in assessing which of these devices the artists chose to name. Many (though not all) of these refer to formal elements of the music. For example, the only mention of musical aesthetics in the lyrics of Da Vinci's Notebook's 'Title of the Song' refers to an elevating modulation and pitch shift: 'modulation and I hold a high note'. The part of The Conchords' 'Think About It' in which Bret and Jemaine sing 'this is where we break it down' and 'this is where we build it up now' particularly caught my attention (and causes the song to merit inclusion in my category of songs which self-reflexively satirise musical devices). Here the singers refer to the textural breakdown that occurs towards the end of the song, thus inviting analysis of the musical texture. In 'How to Write a Love Song', many of the lyrics which focus on musical aesthetics mention formal aspects: 'now watch as I change the key'; 'to make it sensual I sing it in a minor key'; 'now that's the first verse and now I'm gonna take it to the bridge'. In the case of boy band parodies, some of these formal techniques—such as the elevating modulation—are named in the lyrics because they constitute key devices that set boy band music apart from other mainstream pop formats.[65] For the purpose of my analysis which considers the critical function of parody, these devices are thus more interesting to focus on than other musical aspects which are not named in the lyrics.

The second reason for conducting formalist analysis is because, in some cases, the formal elements of music constituted the elements which afforded the most meaning in the context of the song's function as parody—even when they were not explicitly named in the lyrics. For example, the deliberate banality of Jon Lajoie's 'Pop Song'—which causes it to stand out in the context of other boy band parodies—is communicated through its sparse musical texture and relative harmonic stasis. Likewise, the tonal claustrophobia and borrowing from Pachelbel's Canon produce the banality that characterises Lajoie's 'Radio Friendly Song'. In both cases, these structural features distinguish Lajoie's songs both from other pop parodies and 'sincere' mainstream pop music.

That said, my musical analysis is not exclusively formalist. Sometimes the songs merit discussion of other notable musical aspects including vocal timbre, style, and groove. Any particular musical feature is only discussed when it is relevant to the

[64] Dai Griffiths, 'Elevating Form and Elevating Modulation', *Popular Music* 34, no. 1 (January 2015): 22–44; Walter Everett, 'Making Sense of Rock's Tonal Systems', *Music Theory Online* 10, no. 4 (December 2004).
[65] This will be discussed further in Chapter 4.

meaning of the song or parody, however. The music analysis throughout the thesis is always rooted in social, political, and cultural contexts. Since its inception, popular music analysis has (in general) upheld its commitment to considering music within the social context in which it was conceived.[66] I combine close music analysis with analysis of the politics of difference, and a consideration of capitalist forces that shape the music. Connecting musical aesthetics to social meaning in this way is necessary to answer questions such as 'how does pop parody use musical aesthetics to conduct a critique of socio-economic structures?' The exaggerated emphasis on elevating modulation in boy band parodies, for example, indicates that these parody artists aim to target musical devices conventionally associated with formal banality and commodification.

### 0.1.7 Knowingness/Ignorance

Self-reflexivity, and the tension between knowingness and ignorance, are key concepts which I draw on frequently in my analysis of parody throughout the thesis. The interplay of the respective positions of knowingness and ignorance is a key facet of the critical potential of parody and satire. This interplay functions on three different, yet related, levels. The first level concerns the attitude inscribed in the texts in question: the parodic work is knowing, while the original text that constitutes the object of parody is ignorant. As Hutcheon observes, parody is imitation *with critical distance.* This critical distance allows the parody to comment on the nature of the original text, be it in a ridiculing or gentle manner. In this act of commentary through parodic representation, the creator of the parodic work embodies a superior position of knowingness relative to the original text.

Each individual audience member is likely to interpret a work of parody differently. A detailed sociological survey of audience reception to pop parodies is beyond the remit of my thesis, which focuses mainly on the musical work as object. It would be foolish, however, to completely ignore the possibility of varying audience positions. As Griffin observes, 'a satire's audience is never unitary or homogenous: its audience comprehends those readers with whom it seeks to ingratiate itself, those it expects to antagonise, those whose prejudices it flatters, those whose attitudes it may actually hope to alter'.[67] The second level on which this aforementioned split between knowingness and ignorance operates depends upon the varied responses from the audience of the work of satire or parody. The parts of the audience who are in-the-know are those who comprehend the satirical intention behind the work of art, while those not-in-the-know are oblivious to

[66] This commitment is set out in Richard Middleton, ed., *Reading Pop: Approaches to Textual Analysis in Popular Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Allan F. Moore, ed., *Analyzing Popular Music* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Allan F. Moore, *Song Means: Analysing and Interpreting Recorded Popular Song* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013).
[67] Griffin, *Satire,* 188.

it, and take the work at face value. Katherine Turner observes that 'one of the most crucial aspects of successful irony is that there is an *in-crowd* who "gets" the irony. Otherwise, the objective fails and the proponent or creator may come across as inept, which has the same practical effect as explaining a joke'.[68] Satire, irony, and parody can thus work to divide the audience into two camps, of 'critical' versus 'uncritical' members.

The third level on which the split between knowingness and ignorance operates also depends upon the audience's response to the parody, although it works in tension with the second level described above. Audience members who are able to recognise the source of the parody—that is, the original text upon which the parody is based—possess a fuller understanding of the parody than those who are unfamiliar with its source. Yet the implications of this are different, depending on the field in which the work of parody is situated. Let us consider an example from straightforward political satire. When Kate McKinnon and Alec Baldwin parodied the debates between Clinton and Trump on *Saturday Night Live* in the run-up to the 2016 election, audience members became part of the knowing 'in crowd' by recognising the character traits of the real-life candidates as portrayed by the two actors. The more familiarity the audience had with the real-life Trump and Clinton, the more likely they were to enjoy—and understand the critical implications of—the satirical sketch. It is by no means the case, however, that intimate acquaintance with the characteristics of Trump and Clinton translated to endorsement of either figure, or even implied that the audience took pleasure in seeing them. Familiarity with political figures, rather, is evidence only of an interest—common among many citizens of varying political persuasions—in political news. In the case of parodied pop songs, however, being part of the 'in crowd' that recognises the source of the parody is more likely to indicate that one is a fan of the original music, especially if the song reference is obscure.

This third mode of being in-the-know can thus operate in conflict with the second kind of knowingness described above. We can conclude that the idea of a knowing 'in crowd' which understands the parodic reference can be configured according to two different criteria. The relevance of each criterion depends upon the type of parody that is at stake in each case. If the parody is especially ridiculing of the original text (as is the case with parodic pop songs by Jon Lajoie, for example), then members of the audience who 'get' the satirical intent of the parody constitute evidence of the parody having succeeded, at least to some extent, in its aim of critiquing the original. Regarding parody that is more affectionate than ridiculing with respect to its original source (such as the songs of Weird Al Yankovic), however, audience members who 'get' the parodic

[68] Katherine L. Turner, 'Introduction: The Sound of Irony/The Irony of Sound', in *This Is the Sound of Irony: Music, Politics and Popular Culture,* ed. Turner (Farnham, Surrey; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2015), 9.

reference show themselves to be fans of the music that is being parodied. This implies that any critique of this music is likely to be blunted, and that such parody will function more as loving tribute than scathing attack, from the perspective of both the creator and the audience.

## 0.2 Chapter Summaries

Part I, comprising only Chapter 1, provides necessary contextual information to set the scene for the material examined in Parts II and III. An examination of extant literature on musical parody reveals a lacuna in scholarship on pop parody that focuses on musical aesthetics. The taxonomy of types of musical comedy and parody that follows—which is the first of its kind—serves to contextualise the parody case studies. I explain the common factor which links the main case studies in the thesis: all satirise a form of mainstream pop through the musical aesthetics, lyrics, and (where one exists) video, while the lyrics self-reflexively name the musical devices mocked. The final part of Chapter 1 provides an introduction to mainstream and manufactured pop. I show that, despite a turn to 'poptimism' in recent years of popular music scholarship and criticism, 'manufactured' pop (such as boy band music) still tends to be devalued from an aesthetic perspective.

Parts II and III each focus on different bodies of music in order to shed light on issues of power and politics in pop music. Part II, comprising Chapters 2 and 3, looks at white artists parodying black music, focusing particularly on parody songs by the New Zealand musical comedy duo Flight of the Conchords. Chapter 2 examines two songs: The Conchords' 'Think About It', and the Motown hit and civil rights anthem that it parodies, Marvin Gaye's 'What's Going On'. I argue that 'Think About It' satirises the idea of pop music as political protest. The Conchords' parodic interpretation of scat singing highlights the tension between creativity and commercialism in 'What's Going On' and Motown music in general, thus drawing attention to the contradiction inherent in a political protest song used for a record company's commercial gain. Consideration of The Conchords' parody song thus prompts me to conduct a Marxist analysis of 'What's Going On' (and the eponymous album on which it features), Marvin Gaye, and Motown music. In a discussion of the political and social context surrounding 'What's Going On', I re-formulate received ideas about the song's place in Motown history, questioning the extent to which Gaye's album should be seen as distinct from Motown's standard output.

In a straightforward sense, the lyrics of 'Think About It' highlight the futility of anti-capitalist resistance in twenty-first-century western society. The Conchords present a cynical attitude regarding the potential of both pop music and satire to constitute tools

for political protest. I argue that their parody song presents a double layer of critique. On the first level, the song is critical of its chosen target, taking a stance of satirical cynical distance towards 'What's Going On' and the notion of pop music as protest. On the second level, however, The Conchords self-reflexively critique their own satirical stance, by showing an awareness of their position of knowingness. I thus posit that 'Think About It' constitutes a successful example of parodic self-reflexivity. The Conchords overcome Žižek's problem of cynical distance by demonstrating an awareness of this cynical distance in their parody song.

Chapter 3, in contrast, presents a less successful example of self-reflexivity in parody. This chapter introduces the dimension of race to the discussion on parody and pop. I explore the racial dynamics which are inevitably present when white artists such as The Conchords satirise black genres including Motown and hip hop. The chapter begins by focusing on another Conchords parody: 'Hiphopopotamus versus Rhymenoceros', which satirises white hip hop artists including Eminem and the Beastie Boys. I show how The Conchords' nuanced interpretation of the Insider/Outsider binary, along with their self-deprecating personae, serve as strategies for negotiating possible accusations of cultural appropriation regarding their parodies of black music. I then open up the discussion to analyse other white hip hop artists (both parodic and sincere), including Eminem, The Lonely Island, Jon Lajoie, Weird Al Yankovic, and Nerdcore artists. These examples suggest that self-reflexivity and the adoption of a nerdy underdog persona are common tactics used by white artists to negotiate the racialised hip hop landscape. The racial insensitivity of the comedy rapper Lil Dicky, however, shows that self-reflexivity alone by no means translates to progressive politics, and is furthermore a useless shield against the economic reality of cultural appropriation. I thus question the use of self-reflexivity if it does little to materially change the world in which we live. The question of mainstream versus periphery is shown to be a key factor in debates surrounding cultural appropriation in music. In considering the whiteness of parody artists the chapter begins to highlight the racial (and gender) demographics typical in musical comedy and parody: these artists are disproportionately white and male.

Chapter 4 introduces boy band music, which is the focus of Part III. Complementing and extending the discussion on mainstream pop in Chapter 1, I analyse the scholarly and critical response to boy band music. I observe that the masculinist bias that has historically pervaded the discourse of music studies has led to a collective scorning of this music as a product for girls who are apparently duped by the culture industry. The musical aesthetics especially of boy band music have been overlooked in music studies, as scholars (generally) have assumed the music holds little aesthetic value or interest. The chapter helps to fill the lacuna on boy band research by providing a comprehensive

definition of the boy band, and an overview of the music's aesthetics and socio-economic function. This outline of the specific characteristics of boy band music is necessary for my investigation of boy band parodies which follows in Chapter 5. The final part of Chapter 4 examines the politics of gender and sexuality pertaining to boy band music and fandom. In a consideration of the recent feminist backlash against critics' and scholars' dismissal of boy bands, I argue that both feminism and Marxism (not one or the other) must be harnessed in order to fully understand the boy band's place in society.

Boy band music—as it is commonly perceived in society as the most 'manufactured' of all musical formats—constitutes low-hanging fruit for parody artists seeking to mount a critique of the 'inauthentic' commercialism of the pop music industry. Returning to close analysis of parody songs, Chapter 5 focuses on songs which poke fun at the aesthetics and socio-economics of boy band pop. The binaries of knowingness/ignorance, authenticity/commercialism, and mainstream/periphery play important roles in the analysis of parodies by Axis of Awesome, Da Vinci's Notebook, and Jon Lajoie. I particularly use the tools of music analysis to demonstrate how the songs present critique through humorous exaggeration of the aesthetics of boy band music. The findings of Chapter 4 assist this analysis. Several of the parody songs—Axis of Awesome's 'How to Write a Love Song' and Da Vinci's Notebook's 'Title of the Song'—particularly evoke the music of the R&B boy band Boyz II Men. This revelation prompts me to examine the racial politics of both boy band music and pop parody. Building on the conclusion of Chapter 3, I find that Axis of Awesome's parody especially highlights uncomfortable racial dynamics that pervade boy band music and parodies of black music by white artists. An examination of 'Dick in a Box', a loving parody of 1990s R&B by The Lonely Island and Justin Timberlake, serves to complicate these racial dynamics: Justin Timberlake treads a fine line between black and white music, as well as occupying the dual position of both the subject and object of pop parody.

The second half of Chapter 5 focuses on Jon Lajoie's relatively unusual decision to create parody songs which are just as empty and banal as the mainstream music that they mock. Lajoie's songs thus challenge common assumptions about what constitutes good or bad music, and good or bad parody. The chapter (and the thesis as a whole) demonstrates how pop parody complicates received notions of 'good/bad', 'critical/uncritical', and 'mainstream/alternative' music, thus proving its value as a form worthy of scholarly attention. Chapter 5 thus presents two key avenues of analysis: it demonstrates how pop parody functions on a structural level, and it also reveals dynamics of race, authenticity, and commercialism in both pop and parody.

The Conclusion draws together several argumentative threads running through the thesis. A boy band parody created partly by women for a feminist television show—*Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*'s 'A Boy Band Made Up of Four Joshes'—helps to highlight

distinctions between male-produced parody (including most of the case studies in this thesis) and female-produced parody. I discuss how the findings of each chapter suggest a particular framing of the relationship between the politics of difference and capitalism: parody artists, scholars, and critics target Othered identities as scapegoats in place of effective anti-capitalist resistance. The thesis thus reveals pop parody songs as important sites for the working of ideology relating to capitalism and the politics of difference.

# PART I

# CONTEXT

# PART II
# FLIGHT OF THE CONCHORDS

# CHAPTER 2

## 'THIS IS WHERE WE BREAK IT DOWN'
### MOTOWN, RACE, AND CAPITALISM IN FLIGHT OF THE CONCHORDS' 'THINK ABOUT IT'

Chapters 2 and 3 explore the function of self-reflexivity in twenty-first century pop parodies, foregrounding examples of successful and unsuccessful presentations of self-reflexivity respectively. Žižek's theory of cynical distance set out in the Introduction suggests that the knowing satirical stance of parodic works is no longer enough to constitute socio-political critique. The present chapter shows how Flight of the Conchords (hereafter 'The Conchords'), through their parody of Marvin Gaye's 1971 Motown hit 'What's Going On', attempt to overcome this difficultly by *being knowing about the fact that they are knowing*. They ascend to a higher rung on the ladder of self-reflexivity, so that they are able to incorporate a critique—or at least an acknowledgement—of cynical distance itself into their parodic work. The presence of The Conchords' dual personae—first, as the show's real-life creators (who I will refer to throughout this chapter as 'McKenzie' and 'Clement'), and second, as the show's fictional characters (who I will call 'Bret' and 'Jemaine')—allows them to explore the implications of Žižek's critique operating on several different levels, through a complex web of knowingness and self-reflexivity. The friction between The Conchords' respective personae opens up a further space for critique that complicates the critical message inscribed in the parody songs themselves. The co-existence of multiple layers of self-reflexivity allows The Conchords to negotiate the traps that often befall producers of pop parody, namely the problem of cynical distance.

A key function of parody is criticism: the parody presents a critique of pop music. Exploring this function of pop parody leads naturally to an investigation of the original music targeted by the parody—in this case, 'What's Going On', the eponymous album om which it features, and Motown music more widely. I conduct a Marxist analysis of the protest song as commodity, a re-assessment of the relationship between creativity and commercialism in Motown music, and an investigation of *What's Going On*'s place within this. Like most chapters in the thesis, Chapter 2 focuses on both parody and pop music. The chapter demonstrates how pop parody functions while also shedding light on the politics of Motown. 'Think About It' highlights debates surrounding Marvin Gaye and Motown—specifically, the tension between political protest and commercial interests in this kind of pop music. The Conchords song is shown to be an effective

parody —and an effective demonstration of self-reflexivity—in critiquing the pernicious effects of consumer capitalism, both in pop music and in wider society.

## 2.1 'Insiders Posing as Outsiders'

Flight of the Conchords, formed by Bret McKenzie and Jemaine Clement, who describe themselves as New Zealand's 'fourth most popular guitar-based digi-bongo a cappella rap-funk comedy duo', amassed a cult following through their mockumentary-style sitcom, which ran from 2007 to 2009.[1] McKenzie and Clement play caricatures of themselves as young immigrants struggling to break into New York's music industry. The show's humour derives from the duo's nerdy, boyish naivety; their endearing social awkwardness; and their miserable failure to make an impact on New York's music scene, partly due to the hapless incompetence of their manager, Murray, who works at the New Zealand embassy. The contrast between New Zealand's backwardness and inconsequentiality on the one hand, and New York's intimidatingly brash modernity on the other, is frequently exaggerated for comic effect. This is clearly evidenced in an episode in which the Prime Minister of New Zealand visits the East Coast of the USA with the hope of meeting the American President (Barack Obama at the time).[2] Due to the Prime Minister's insignificance in international politics, he is flatly denied an audience with the President. In order to save face, Murray arranges for an Obama look-alike to meet the Prime Minister instead, and the Prime Minister remains happily unaware of the con throughout. Elsewhere in the episode, Bret is appointed bodyguard to the Prime Minister, asking if he can have a gun: 'Is there a New Zealand government gun?', to which Murray replies, 'yeah, but the army's got that'. In setting up Bret and Jemaine's homeland as a country of such primitive innocence that it possesses only a single gun, the pair are characterised as helpless immigrants stumbling through the alien environment of New York. The popular music scholar Kirsten Zemke describes the 'meta-narrative of the series' as 'marginalised white (New Zealand) men uncomfortable in a dominant (American) white man's world', observing that 'the series' overarching plot of Bret and Jemaine's "failure" in the music industry is paralleled in the episodes where their failure with women, their failure with gaining financial independence, their

[1] Andrew Pettie, 'Flight of the Conchords: Fasten Your Seatbelts', *The Telegraph,* 23 April 2009, http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/tvandradio/5206664/Flight-of-the-Conchords-fasten-your-seatbelts.html. The act began as a live show that was subsequently adapted for a BBC radio programme in 2005, and a television series that ran for two seasons on the American HBO network. The Conchords have won several awards, including a Grammy for the show's music.
[2] 'Prime Minister', *Flight of the Conchords* (BBC4, 1 June 2010), https://learningonscreen.ac.uk/ondemand/index.php/prog/.

failure as "serious" rock 'n' roll musicians, and their perceived failures at manhood in general'.[3] Perpetually broke and bumbling, the duo always feel like outsiders.

The band's parody songs must be considered within this context of cultural Otherness, constructed through their status as immigrants and lack of success as musicians. The Conchords parody a range of popular genres, often imitating specific artists or songs—including Bob Marley, Pet Shop Boys, and Madonna—who have achieved a place in the canon of pop music 'greats'. In their fictional characters as failed musicians, Bret and Jemaine's insignificance invokes a jarring contrast with the critically-acclaimed artists they imitate and look up to. Bret and Jemaine embody a position of clueless naivety, while the famous pop stars enjoy a status of knowing superiority: the stars possess the knowledge of how to become successful musicians, while the aspirational New Zealanders do not. Seen through this lens, The Conchords' parodies might be interpreted as loving tributes to their idols' work, rather than as critical commentary. Viewed from a wider contextual perspective, however, McKenzie and Clement enjoy the real-life status of a successful musical comedy act with their own critically-acclaimed television series and a strong fan base; The Conchords as real people are thus very much in-the-know. As legitimate musicians in their own right, McKenzie and Clement share a playing field with the artists they parody (although as a comedy act, they operate in a different strand of the music industry to the serious artists they imitate), which grants them an authoritative voice capable of producing mocking satire, as opposed to respectful pastiche. As the journalist Neha Kale observes, The Conchords are really 'insiders posing as outsiders'.[4]

The sociologist Mike Lloyd has also noted the disjunction between the band's self-deprecating, dorky persona in the non-musical parts of the show, and their assured display of talent in the cleverly parodied pop songs: 'it is in making this music that Bret and Jemaine transcend the conflicting personalities and differentials of status that so much sitcom depends upon. Thus, our previously positioned nerds are able to turn the tables and make humour, not solely based on their own incompetence, but by parodying modern pop music'.[5] We can suggest that the characters, who often experience humiliation through their nerdy naivety, are able to redeem themselves by gaining control of the situation through their music. The critical potential of The Conchords'

[3] Zemke, '"I Told You I Was Freaky"', 119.
[4] Neha Kale, '"Who Likes to Rock the Party?": Cultural Appropriation in "Flight of the Conchords"', *Metro Magazine*, no. 162 (2009): 118.
[5] Mike Lloyd, 'Revenge of the N[Z]Erds?: "Flight of the Conchords" as Good Humour', *Journal of New Zealand Studies*, no. 6/7 (October 2008): 131.

parodies must therefore be considered in light of this disjunction in terms of knowingness, caused by their dual and often conflicting subject-positions.[6]

## 2.2 Parody at First Glance: The Conchords' Critique of Marvin Gaye

The Concords' song 'Think About It', which can be read as a parody of Marvin Gaye's 'What's Going On', demonstrates the tensions brought about by the simultaneous enactment of these conflicting positions of knowing insider and ignorant outsider.[7] In their negotiation of these tensions, The Conchords ultimately reveal their superior position of being in-the-know. 'Think About It' is pervaded by a decisive aura of cynicism regarding the futility of political resistance, rendering it a natural bedfellow of Žižek's equally cynical theory on ironic distance. First of all, it dissects the question of whether political protest in general is most effective through sincere or satirical critique, ultimately revealing both types to be inadequate. It also considers this issue with specific regard to pop music's suitability as a medium for political resistance—and, likewise, pop music as protest is shown to be a futile venture, both in its direct form as sincere protest music, and in the satirical form of pop parody. 'Think About It' thus comprises a double layer of critique. Initially, we have the standard layer of parodic critical distance (as identified by Hutcheon), whereby the song adopts a critical, satirical stance towards the original work (in this case, Gaye's song), and the idea of pop music as protest that 'What's Going On' represents. What makes this parodic song somewhat exceptional, however, is that Concords are able to step beyond this primary position and enact a further layer of critical distance, performing a meta-critique of their own already ironic stance. In this space of meta-awareness they create the potential for transformative critique.

[6] I will mainly consider The Conchords' music in the context of their television show, in which the characters are most fully developed, but the same personae feature in their radio programme and live shows; The Conchords' characters are consistent across all media.

[7] 'Think About It' features in Season 1, Episode 3 ('Mugged') of *Flight of the Conchords*. 'Mugged', *Flight of the Conchords* (BBC4, 28 October 2009), https://learningonscreen.ac.uk/ondemand/index.php/prog/007178C3?bcast=35916437. A video clip of the song as it is seen and heard in the episode is available on YouTube: r8dkid, *Flight of the Conchords Ep 3 Think About It*, 2007, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TLEK0UZH4cs. A slightly different version of the song featured on Conchords' debut album, *Flight of the Conchords* (released in 2008). The audio recording of the album version is available at TheUnderground00, *Think About It - Flight of the Conchords*, 2008, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KIICPgW8xUw.

### 2.2.1 'What's Going On': Gaye's Heartfelt Plea for a Better World

In order to understand the nature of The Conchords' parodic critique it is first necessary to analyse Gaye's original song in the context of pop music as protest. 'What's Going On' has earned a reputation as one of the quintessential protest songs, and it stands as an enduring symbol of the American civil rights movement. As Mark Anthony Neal has observed, the eponymous album on which the song was released is 'generally regarded as the seminal black protest recording', which 'effectively summarised the hope and despair of an entire generation of African-American freedom fighters'.[8] The album represents Gaye's attempt to inject a social conscience into Motown music; it expresses public discontent surrounding a range of contemporary socio-political struggles, including the Vietnam war, civil rights, the ecology, and urban poverty.[9] Two remarks stand out in Gaye's reflection on the album's conception: 'I wondered to myself, "With the world exploding around me, how am I supposed to keep singing love songs?"', and 'I felt a strong urge to write music and write lyrics that would touch the souls of men'.[10]

The original inspiration for 'What's Going On' is attributed to Renaldo 'Obie' Benson, who was a member of another Motown group, the Four Tops. Like Gaye, Benson felt angered by contemporary political troubles. In May 1969 the Four Tops stopped at Berkeley as part of a tour, where Benson witnessed police brutality directed at anti-war protestors.[11] Seeing this, he asked, 'What is happening here? [ … ] Why are they sending kids so far away from their families overseas? Why are they attacking their own children in the streets?'[12] He expressed these concerns to the songwriter Al Cleveland, who responded with a song that reflected them. The song was then presented to Gaye, who in turn revised the melody and lyrics with the hope that the song would alert listeners to 'what's going on' in the world around them, both at home and abroad. The singer was affected by conversations with his brother, who fought in the Vietnam war.

> Mother, mother
> There's too many of you crying

[8] Mark Anthony Neal, 'Trouble Man: The Art and Politics of Marvin Gaye', *The Western Journal of Black Studies* 22, no. 4 (1998): 252.
[9] Public sentiment against the Vietnam war was a civil rights issue as well as a pacifist one. Four out of ten American soldiers in Vietnam were black, and many Motown employees had friends and relatives who fought in the war. This led some to question: why are we sending our people to fight overseas on behalf of a country that fails to treat us with humanity in the first place? Why should black folk die for America? On the African American experience of the Vietnam war, see James E. Westheider, *Fighting on Two Fronts: African Americans and the Vietnam War* (New York: New York University Press, 1997); David J. Armor, 'Race and Gender in the U.S. Military', *Armed Forces & Society* 23, no. 1 (Fall 1996): 7–27.
[10] Quoted in Dorian Lynskey, *33 Revolutions per Minute: A History of Protest Songs* (London: Faber and Faber, 2010), 198–99.
[11] Lynskey, 197–98.
[12] Quoted in Lynskey, 197–98.

Brother, brother, brother
There's far too many of you dying
You know we've got to find a way
To bring some loving here today

[…]

Picket lines and picket signs
Don't punish me with brutality
Talk to me, so you can see
Oh, what's going on
What's going on
Yeah, what's going on
Ah, what's going on

The lyrics make a sincere plea to end state-sponsored violence, implicitly condemning the Vietnam war and police brutality, which came to a head in the Detroit riots of 1967 and the Kent State shootings of 1970, in which four anti-Vietnam war protestors were fatally shot by the Ohio National Guard.[13] While an audience contemporary with the record's release is likely to have understood the allusions to these specific events, the lyrics are nevertheless sufficiently open to ensure their enduring universal relevance. The song could thus be heard as speaking to today's Black Lives Matter movement just as directly as to the civil rights and anti-war movements of half a century ago. It is this continuing relevance as a symbol of social discontent that makes the song a particularly suitable object for The Conchords' satirisation of pop music as political protest.

The direct—and perhaps naïve—sincerity of the manner in which Gaye conveys his message of tolerance and peace renders 'What's Going On' something of an easy target for parody. With no hint of irony or pretence, Gaye's critique of the contemporary political situation is expressed through simple, earnest statements, such as 'war is not the answer' and 'only love can conquer hate'. Gaye uses emotive language and builds a sense of intimacy with the listener by addressing them with personal familiarity, as 'mother', 'brother', and 'sister'. This heartfelt tone is also communicated through the music. Martin Lüthe observes how the multi-tracking of Gaye's voice throughout most of the song represents a 'quest for a communal, collective voice—a voice consisting of many, too loud to be overheard and ignored'.[14] The gospel-choir quality of 'What's

[13] See Ruth Charnock, '"Things Ain't What They Used to Be": Marvin Gaye and the Making of "What's Going On"', *United Academics Journal of Social Sciences* 2, no. 12 (2012): 88.
[14] Martin Lüthe, *Color-Line and Crossing-over: Motown and Performances of Blackness in 1960s American Culture* (Trier: WVT Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2011), 166.

Going On' highlights the important role played by the church in black communities and in the civil rights movement.[15] This quality is present in the declamations of 'ooh' and 'ah', and the call-and-response technique used in the chorus, where 'what's going on' is heard first by Gaye's solo voice, followed by a crowd of voices that imitates the line:

> Ooh, what's going on (what's going on)
> What's going on (what's going on)
> Yeah, what's going on (what's going on)
> Ah, what's going on

Throughout the song, the melody is sung in a style that is somewhere between speaking and singing, so that the lyrics are clearly understood. The relaxed tempo, slower than most other Motown tracks, allows the listener time to take in the words. All this suggests the song's political message is very much intended to be heard, repeated, and joined in with.

### 2.2.2 'Think About It': The Conchords' Deliberate Misunderstanding of the World

In contrast to the straightforward meaning of 'What's Going On', The Conchords' parody is characteristically postmodern in its eschewing of sincerity and clarity. Gaye's singular message is replaced with multiple layers of meaning and a knowing self-reflexivity that typifies the playful irony of twenty-first-century musical comedy acts. The humour of 'Think About It' hinges on the mock sincerity with which Bret and Jemaine declare their intention to talk about so-called 'issues'—note the deliberately vague term—and the revelation, as the song progresses, of the band's hapless naivety regarding the real nature of the world's problems.[16] Each new discussion of an 'issue'

[15] Neal, 'Trouble Man', 252. The influence of gospel music on the Motown style has been noted by the popular music scholar Jon Fitzgerald, who points out that many of the artists and producers employed by the Motown label had strong ties with black churches. See Jon Fitzgerald, 'Black Pop Songwriting 1963-1966: An Analysis of U.S. Top Forty Hits by Cooke, Mayfield, Stevenson, Robinson, and Holland-Dozier-Holland', *Black Music Research Journal.* 27, no. 2 (2007): 134.

[16] In the introduction to 'Think About It' in a live show, Bret says in a deadpan spoof of sincerity: 'if there's one thing—uh—that we as a band—uh—wanna deal with, it's the issues'. ella elise, *Flight of the Conchords-Issues (Think About It)*, 2007, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EmLHOGT0v4c. The Conchords' choice to use 'issue' rather than even slightly more precise terms such as 'trouble', 'problem' or 'crisis' reflects a twenty-first-century tendency towards what might be termed 'pseudo-activism', in which a person uses their supposed awareness of socio-political problems to cultivate social capital, but takes little or no action to ameliorate the issue. Those of the post-Internet millennial generation are most often accused of fostering this attitude, as evidenced by one of *Saturday Night Live*'s characters known as 'Girl you wish you hadn't started a conversation with at a party', who appeared in several sketches between 2012 and 2017. The girl, portrayed by Cecily Strong, shames the 'Weekend Update' news anchor for his apparent lack of awareness of political issues, yet (like The Conchords in 'Think About It') herself demonstrates a fundamental misunderstanding of such issues. See 'The Girl You Wish You Hadn't Started a Conversation With At a Party', *Dailymotion*, accessed 9 July 2018, https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x1y3tgo.

derails into silliness, culminating in a punchline that shows the pair to have completely missed the point:

> There's children on the street using guns and knives,
> Taking drugs and each other's lives,
> Killing each other with knives and forks,
> Calling each other names like 'dork'.
>
> There's people on the street getting diseases from monkeys.
> Yeah, that's what I said, they're getting diseases from monkeys.
> Now there's junkies with monkey disease.
> Who's touching these monkeys, please?
> Leave these poor sick monkeys alone,
> They've got problems enough as it is.

By transforming Gaye's heartfelt pacifist anthem into nonsensical satirical play, The Concords make fun of Gaye's idealistic vision for political protest—and more specifically, his use of pop music as a vehicle for such protest. The Concords position themselves as knowing subjects, with Gaye the naïve and ignorant object of ridicule. Somewhat paradoxically, however, it is precisely through the adoption of a clueless persona that The Conchords are able to channel their superior stance of knowingness. This mask of naivety adopted by The Concords provides the channel through which they can derail Gaye's serious points into silliness, thus satirising (and implicitly critiquing) his stance.

Through their parody of this specific song, The Conchords perform a wider critique of the idea that protest through pop music—or indeed, protest through any medium—could effect change in the current age of late capitalism. Adorno argued that, because the interests of capital always prevailed in the pop industry, this music constituted a wholly unsuitable vehicle for the expression of political discontent:

> I believe, in fact, that attempts to bring political protest together with 'popular music'—that is, with entertainment music—are for the following reason doomed from the start. The entire sphere of popular music, even there where it dresses itself up in modernist guise, is to such a degree inseparable from past *Warencharakter* [commodity character], from consumption, from the cross-eyed transfixion with amusement, that attempts to outfit it with a new function remain entirely superficial. And I have to say that when somebody sets himself up and for whatever reason sings maudlin music about Vietnam being unbearable, I find that really it is this song that is in fact unbearable, in that by taking the

> horrendous and making it somehow consumable, it ends up wringing something like consumption-qualities out of it.[17]

Adorno here suggests that when someone produces an anti-war pop song (or any other kind of political protest song), the gesture of support for pacifism is obscured by the objective to sell the song. His example particularly targets songs protesting against the Vietnam war, a category which would encompass 'What's Going On'. While The Conchords do not specifically address the pacifist or civil rights messages in Gaye's song, they draw on its style as an example of a pop protest song, making reference to several different socio-political concerns. 'Think About It' gives an implicit nod to Mark Fisher's observation that even ostensibly radical protests are often unavoidably bound up in the ideology of consumerism.[18] Fisher observes that the Live Aid and Live 8 concerts in 1985 and 2005 respectively attempted to alleviate world poverty by harnessing the power of Western consumerism, rather than demanding for structural political reform. Live Aid and Live 8 organisers persuaded audiences that if they bought the right product, some of the proceeds would contribute towards eradicating poverty in developing parts of the world: you buy the wristband and save the planet.[19] This suggests that 'protest' is only consumerism masquerading as something more oppositional. The Live Aid and Live 8 concerts involved a 'global elite' of professional entertainers working within the present system in an attempt not to eradicate this system, but only to alleviate some of its worst effects. The protest was, if I may be forgiven the pun, merely a band aid, not a cure.[20]

In 'Think About It', one verse begins—

> They're turning kids into slaves
> Just to make cheaper sneakers

—thus purportedly protesting against the appalling child labour that props up our globalised capitalist system. This critique is subverted, however, by the punchline as the verse continues—

> What's the real cost?
> Cause the sneakers don't seem that much cheaper.

[17] Ric Brown, *Theodor Adorno on Popular Music and Protest*, accessed 10 October 2017, http://archive.org/details/RicBrownTheordorAdornoonPopularMusicandProtest.
[18] Fisher noted the futility of protests in an era of what he termed 'capitalist realism', which illustrates the pessimistic idea that capitalism has gradually become accepted, even among those on the Left, as the only realistic political system. Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*.
[19] Fisher, 14–15.
[20] As Fisher notes, 'Protests have formed a kind of carnivalesque background noise to capitalist realism'. Fisher, 14.

> Ooh, why are we paying so much for sneakers when you get them made by little slave kids?

—suggesting that here in the West, we are more concerned about easy gratification of our consumer desires (the price of the trainers) than the abominable labour conditions that make such gratification possible. The verse emphasises our complicity in the capitalist system, by observing that even when we claim to protest against these labour conditions, we are likely to buy the sweat shop-produced trainers anyway, thus ensuring the continuing survival of the very system we purport to condemn. Like Fisher's analysis of Live Aid, 'Think About It' highlights the seeming inevitability that many forms of political activism—including protest music—will be engulfed by the petty concerns of individualist consumerism. When protest music is complicit with the forces of consumption, its potential for effective critique is weakened. The Conchords thus poke fun at both the tone (naïve sincerity) and the medium (pop music) of Gaye's political message, here offering a critique akin to Adorno's set out in the quotation above. From their post-millennial perspective, The Conchords have the advantage of historical distance: they have witnessed the relative ineffectualness of both sincere, direct political protest (sometimes referred to as 'placard-waving'), and of pop music as a tool against socio-political problem that is bound up with the capitalist system (ultimately, Live Aid and Live 8 enjoyed only negligible success in their aim to 'make poverty history'). According to the harshest critical interpretation of The Conchords' parody, Gaye is painted as naïve for believing that a pop song could change the world: looking back at the events of the last few decades with the scepticism of cynical distance, The Conchords' message is that it is clear that we know better.

## 2.3 The Story of *What's Going On:* An Uneasy Marriage of Political Protest and Commercial Success

The history of Motown music is marked by a tension between commercial interests and artistic autonomy—between music as a commodity to be sold and music as a vehicle for a political message—that has long pervaded the pop industry in general.[21] 'What's Going On' epitomises such tensions. The commonly accepted narrative surrounding the track's origins reads as a battle between Gaye's desire to release music with an explicitly political message and Berry Gordy's (the founder of Motown records) resistance to this

[21] See Keith Negus, 'Where the Mystical Meets the Market: Creativity and Commerce in the Production of Popular Music', *The Sociological Review* 43, no. 2 (1 May 1995): 316–41.

on commercial grounds.[22] Gaye is generally regarded as the victor of the battle, with the enduring popularity of 'What's Going On' (along with the album as a whole) held up as proof of his triumph.

### 2.3.1 A Win for All: Gaye gets his Message out, and Gordy gets his Money

Gordy's vision was to shape Motown records according to the principles of Fordist capitalist production, modelled on the production line system he had witnessed as an employee of the Ford car factory in Detroit:

> At the plant the cars started out as just a frame, pulled along on conveyor belts until they emerged at the end of the line—brand spanking new cars rolling off the line. I wanted the same concept for my company, only with artists and songs and records. I wanted a place where a kid off the street could walk in one door an unknown and come out another a recording artist—a star.[23]

At Motown, hit songs were churned out rapidly, often in just a few hours. A believer in healthy competition, Gordy placed rival teams of songwriters in different rooms, instructed them each to come up with a hit song, and then selected the best from among them.[24] He prioritised a record's commercial potential over apparently all else—and by this measure, Motown was extremely successful. The label's records dominated the charts throughout the 1960s, and its headquarters in Detroit became known as 'Hitsville USA'. Motown is generally considered to be the first black music label to successfully cross over into the white market.[25]

Gordy was reluctant, on straightforward economic grounds, for his music to get caught up in controversial political issues. He was especially fearful that expressing a strong position on civil rights would threaten Motown's popularity with white audiences. Dorian Lynskey observes that 'Gordy didn't have a radical bone in his body [ … ] When [ … ] new signings the Jackson 5 were asked about politics at a press conference, a Motown handler stepped in to say that the Jacksons didn't trouble

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[22] See, for example, Suzanne E. Smith, *Dancing in the Street: Motown and the Cultural Politics of Detroit* (Cambridge, Mass.; London: Harvard University Press, 2001), 237–38; Lüthe, *Color-Line and Crossing-Over*, 163; Lynskey, *33 Revolutions per Minute*, 198–200; Nelson George, *Where Did Our Love Go?: The Rise & Fall of the Motown Sound* (London: Omnibus, 2003), 178.
[23] Quoted in Smith, *Dancing in the Street*, 14. The quotation, which originally appeared in Gordy's autobiography, is also cited in Lynskey, *33 Revolutions per Minute*, 185; and Ben Edmonds, *What's Going On?: Marvin Gaye and the Last Days of the Motown Sound* (Edinburgh: Mojo Books, 2001), 16–17.
[24] Lynskey, *33 Revolutions per Minute*, 185.
[25] Smith notes that 'Gordy's genius rested in his ability to attract strong talent, to control every aspect of the record production process, and to groom his artists for white "crossover" audiences'. Smith, *Dancing in the Street*, 6.

themselves with such matters because they were "commercial product."'[26] The job of a Motown artist was to perform songs that appealed to a broad audience. Gordy thus resisted Gaye's plan to release what he perceived to be a 'protest album'.[27] Gaye was one of Motown's most lucrative stars, releasing love songs that appealed to a predominantly female audience, and Gordy was concerned to preserve the singer's reputation. Upon hearing Gaye's idea for 'What's Going On', Gordy is reported to have said, 'Marvin, this is crazy […] Stick to what works! […] You've got this great, sexy image and you've got to protect it'.[28]

But according to the dominant narrative of Motown, Gaye proved Gordy wrong: the song and the album were both commercial hits. In February 1971, 'What's Going On' placed at the top of the soul chart and at number two in the pop chart, while the album reached number one in both charts.[29] Their popularity ensured that both Gaye and Gordy achieved their respective goals: the message of political protest reached many people, while the record label reaped significant financial rewards. The success of *What's Going On* suggests that the tension between top-down commercial interest and the political consciousness of the artist was resolved, since it demonstrated that both could flourish simultaneously. Neal observes how Motown Records, through Gaye's song, facilitated the partnership of protest music and consumerism: the protest song was successfully packaged as a commodity.[30] Accounts of the record's history tend to view this as a cause for celebration, with the assumption that everyone came out a winner.[31] Any possible contradictions inherent in the melding of commercial interest and political protest have apparently been overlooked by critics and scholars alike. I will therefore discuss such contradictions here.

### 2.3.2 The Protest Pop Song: Commodifying the Spirit of Activism

Measuring the commercial success of a record is a relatively straightforward task, requiring only the knowledge of tangible sales figures and royalties from records, concert tickets, radio plays, and so on. Offsetting the total sales figure against the cost of the record's production would lead to a calculation of the resulting profit. Measuring a record's success in terms of political resistance is clearly a much more complex

[26] Lynskey, *33 Revolutions per Minute*, 189.
[27] Lüthe, *Color-Line and Crossing-Over*, 163, note 176.
[28] Lüthe, 163, note 176.
[29] George, *Where Did Our Love Go?*, 178.
[30] Neal, 'Trouble Man', 252–54.
[31] See, for example, Smith, *Dancing in the Street*, 237–39; Lüthe, *Color-Line and Crossing-Over*, 166–68; *George, Where Did Our Love Go?*, 178.

undertaking.[32] There is no satisfactory way of tangibly calculating a record's influence on the subsequent course of political action—and this is certainly not something I would pretend to be able to do in the case of *What's Going On*. What I can do, however, is draw attention to the contradictions at work in one possible method of rating *What's Going On*'s effectiveness regarding political resistance. Gaye succeeded in his aim for the message of protest to reach as many listeners as possible, since the record sold many copies. In this case the measure of success in terms of commerce and political resistance respectively are one and the same. If more records are sold, this means that more people have heard Gaye's message: commercial success equals success in political activism.

This situation is, of course, highly problematic. It suggests that by releasing a protest record through a major label, critique of the political and economic system can thrive only through the profiteering of capitalists.[33] Here, both political protest and capitalism can be considered victors. The latter facilitated the flourishing of the former, with a big record label putting its weight behind a protest record. In turn, the spirit of protest helped capitalists to thrive, since the record earned a profit for a major business. But is it possible for political activism and capitalism to both really be winners?

An alternative interpretation sees capitalism successfully exploiting the trend of political protest, ultimately for economic gain. In releasing *What's Going On* through Motown records, the label effectively bought the rights to political protest. The album ended up encapsulating the political discontent of the time *as well as* being a commercial success, so Gordy was happy with it. In some cases, Motown took advantage of the protest song's lucrative selling power. The label tapped into the political discontent that pervaded late 1960s and early 70s Detroit by releasing a string of politically conscious records.[34] Lynskey observes that the output of Norman Whitfield and Barrett Strong (a team of Motown producers)

> suggested that they had a checklist of fashionable causes pinned to the studio wall. 'Message From a Black Man' (1969) tapped post-James Brown black consciousness, 'Psychedelic Shack' (1970) threw on a hippie kaftan, and 'Ungena Za Ulimwengu (Unite the World)' (1971) hitched a ride on the Afrocentric bandwagon. 'Ball of Confusion' alone packed in riots, war, drug addiction, unemployment and the final Beatles album. And yet those close to Whitfield and Strong don't recall them ever discussing these issues with any great passion. 'They didn't talk about politics,' says Williams. That's just what was

[32] For further discussion on music's potential for political resistance, see John Street, *Music and Politics* (Cambridge: Polity, 2012).
[33] Although the track 'What's Going On' focused on the Vietnam war and civil rights, the eponymous album addressed a range of political problems, some of which—such as economic inequality—are more directly attributable to the capitalist system. See, for example, 'Inner City Blues'.
[34] Smith, *Dancing in the Street*, 2.

> happening in the world at the time. Norman and Barrett decided to capitalise on what was happening'. George Clinton of the Parliaments remembers Whitfield taping his band's shows for ideas. 'What bothers me about records like 'Cloud Nine' and 'Psychedelic Shack' [ … ] was that he made them without any commitment to, or awareness of, what the kids were trying to say with that music.[35]

These recollections by past Motown employees suggest that the label's releasing of protest records by no means represents a triumph of socio-political protest over economic interest. It would be more accurate to say that a conscience of political activism was allowed to be expressed through music only so long as the record sold. As Smith notes, the label bosses—the interests of capital—still had the final say regarding politically controversial records:

> Motown's role as a producer of black culture and its ambitions in the business world did not coexist without conflict and contradiction. At Hitsville, U.S.A., commercial concerns about the marketability of a recording often stalled and sometimes cancelled projects that management deemed too politically controversial. The political climate at Motown records was highly variable. Throughout the civil rights era the company wavered between willingness and caution when asked to produce recordings—musical or spoken-word—that involved overt political or racial messages. Sometimes an atmosphere of race consciousness prevailed, and other times a politically conservative ethos dominated.[36]

The situation regarding Motown's production of 'political' records appears to vindicate Adorno's assertion, quoted earlier in this chapter, that popular protest music can never be effective because it cannot be separated from the impulse of consumption. Adorno mentions the 'cross-eyed transfixion with amusement' experienced by consumers of these political pop songs, which The Conchords draw attention to in a live performance of 'Think About It' when they sing, 'we're talking 'bout the issues but we're keepin' it funky'.[37] This aptly encapsulates the juggling act between serious political critique and pleasurable 'consumption-qualities' that Gaye performs in 'What's Going On'. The music can address socio-political issues, but in order to be a sellable commodity it must also sound 'funky': that is, upbeat and easy to listen to. According to Adorno, this trait of pop music, enabled through its standardised, formulaic, and fragmented musical structure—which is intimately tied to its commercial roots—precludes its potential for political critique.[38]

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[35] Lynskey, *33 Revolutions per Minute*, 194. Otis Williams was a Motown producer and member of the vocal group The Temptations.
[36] Smith, *Dancing in the Street*, 18.
[37] The performance is available at ella elise, *Flight of the Conchords- Issues (Think About It)*. Jemaine sings this line, at around 5.30.
[38] See Adorno, 'On Popular Music'.

In 'Think About It', The Conchords bring this tension to the fore through the musical material as well as the lyrics. Some musical devices draw attention—in perhaps a mocking way—to the formulaic construction of pop songs, which can be interpreted as a critique of consumer music that purports to constitute political protest. 'What's Going On' contains two substantial sections (from 1.30 to 2.06, and from 2.58 to the end of the song at 3.48) in which the main vocal line disintegrates into scat singing. These parts of the song include multi-tracked whoops, claps, shouts, and the murmur of many voices chatting amicably in the background. The Conchords perform an exaggerated parody of these sections, imitating Gaye's scat singing with mock sincerity. In my analysis I shall refer to two slightly different versions of 'Think About It': the one that is performed in the television episode, and a slightly different version that was recorded for the band's album *Flight of the Conchords*.[39] Both variants of the song include a break in which most of the instruments cut out, to be replaced by scat singing. In the episode version this break lasts around ten seconds (from 2.16 to 2.25), and the texture is reduced dramatically, as Table 2.1 demonstrates.

| **Before the break** | **During the break** |
|---|---|
| Continuous strings | No strings |
| Lively guitar strumming | Guitar: one strum per bar |
| Bass | Bass: one note per bar |
| Lively drumming | Percussion: finger clicking on 2nd and 4th beats of bar |
| Vocals | Vocals |
| Piano chords | No piano |

Table 2.1. *Comparison of texture before and after break in episode version of 'Think About It'*

During the break, Bret and Jemaine sing, 'this is where we break it down … this is where we do the woah-woo-woah-woo break it down'. In naming the compositional device used in the break, The Conchords perform a meta-critique of the song's structure. In the album version of the song, the break is more extreme. It lasts for around twenty seconds (from 2.22 to 2.40), and all the instruments cut out, leaving only the vocal parts accompanied by finger clicking. The scat singing is highly exaggerated and milked for comic effect, with drawn-out lines such as 'yeah, ooh-ooh, this is the a cappella jams'. In both versions of the song the break is followed by a gradual increase in texture as the various instrumental parts rejoin. In the song performed on the episode version this 'build up' in both texture and pitch (the strings play an ascending phrase) lasts from 2.25

[39] Both versions of the song are available to listen to on YouTube. r8dkid, *Flight of the Conchords Ep 3 Think About It*; TheUnderground00, *Think About It - Flight of the Conchords*.

to the end of the song at 2.34. Bret and Jemaine sing 'this is where we build it up now', repeated with increasing volume and emotional intensity. In the song recorded for the album, the build-up section (from 2.40) expands into an extended passage of improvisation (lasting until the end of the song, which fades out to 3.10) in which all the instruments rejoin the texture in a joyful explosion of activity, as if they have been granted a fresh burst of energy. Here the scat singing becomes even more exaggerated, including lines such as 'jammin' out, just jammin' out'. Indeed, the whole section feels somewhat like an informal jam session.

A relatively straightforward reading of this satirisation of the musical devices—scat singing, and sections of break-down and build-up—commonly used in soul and Motown suggests that it highlights the predictable and formulaic nature of the music's construction, which translates as a critique of its commercial function. Digging a little deeper into the political significance of scat singing serves to complicate this reading, however.[40] This brief musical gesture is implicated in several ideological struggles concerning political economy and race relations in Motown and jazz music, which are channelled through the reception of *What's Going On*. These struggles form part of the tapestry of the overarching narrative that has dominated the reception of Motown—and indeed of most popular music throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. This discourse focuses on the tension between independent artistic creativity and top-down commercial control, as it manifests in the music. The Conchords' satirical scat singing encapsulates this discourse: the improvisatory gesture of scat singing stands for artistic creativity, while Bret and Jemaine's naming of the musical devices points to the rigidity of standardised commercial control. In order to fully understand the meaning of the satirical layer, however, it is first necessary to focus on Gaye's original song in the context of the popular narrative regarding Motown music and creativity. To what extent did *What's Going On* constitute a departure from Motown's usual mode of production?

### 2.3.3 Creative Labour and Alienation in Motown and *What's Going On*

According to the dominant cultural narrative, Motown music is characterised by a lack of creativity: the songwriters and musicians diligently churn out well-worn musical formulae to produce records that are guaranteed to sell.[41] Critics' judgements about the sound of Motown's music are often influenced by assumptions regarding the label's 'manufactured' production methods. Berry Gordy's comparison of his record company to the Fordist assembly line (set out earlier in this chapter) has caught the imagination

[40] On the syntax of scat singing, see Brent Hayes Edwards, 'Louis Armstrong and the Syntax of Scat', *Critical Inquiry* 28, no. 3 (1 March 2002): 618–49.
[41] See Jon Fitzgerald, 'Motown Crossover Hits 1963-1966 and the Creative Process', *Popular Music.* 14, no. 1 (1995): passim.

of journalists, scholars, and fans of Motown, to the extent that it has come to dominate our understanding of everything that Motown stands for, from its business plan to its mode of production to the sound of its music.[42] This idea of a Motown 'assembly line' has become somewhat of a cliché in music journalism, serving to dwarf more nuanced understandings of the record label and its music. Gordy's comment is partly to blame for allowing Motown music to gain a reputation as the epitome of manufactured pop. Fitzgerald points out that Motown music has generally been received negatively by other scholars and journalists:

> Not only has Motown been the victim of obvious historical neglect when compared to co-existing 1960s genres, it has also come under regular attack. Terms such as 'white bread soul', 'corny', 'appalling . . . ill-conceived mush-mallow' have been applied to the music, as have critical statements such as: 'the endearing palliatives which Motown always brought to bear'; 'never afraid of pandering to his audience's most obvious desires'; 'every aspect . . . was controlled'.[43]

In this collection of quotations from several Motown critics, it is difficult to separate criticism of the musical material from that of the production methods and economic context of the music. The way in which Fitzgerald has set out these comments certainly implies that these two factors are often conflated in the imagination of journalists and scholars. These critics appear to share Adorno's assumption that the music's aesthetics cannot be separated from its mode of production.

I suggest, however, that the common perception of Motown music as flimsy and manufactured, and the implied contrast between Motown and other kinds of seemingly more 'authentic' music, is overblown and misguided. Gordy's simplistic metaphor, which compares the record label to a factory assembly line, has served to obscure the messy and complex social relationships that existed between Motown employees. According to Marx's classic interpretation of capitalism, workers are alienated from their labour when they are obliged to sell their labour power to the capitalist, who owns the means of production.[44] The product of the worker's labour (in this case the music) is alien to the worker; it is not properly their own, but that of the capitalist. The commodity becomes fetishised in its separation from the social relations of production. With Motown, this process takes place first of all through the production of the music. We can suggest, however, that a parallel process, akin to fetishism, happens in the recounting of the dominant narrative surrounding Motown's mode of operating. The popularity of

[42] As I have already observed (see note 23 of this chapter), Gordy's quotation has been reproduced, among others, by Lynskey, Edmonds, and Smith.
[43] Fitzgerald, 'Motown Crossover Hits', 2.
[44] See Marx, *Capital,* Vol. 1, Part 1, Chapter 3: 'Money, or the Circulation of Commodities'.

this narrative, fuelled by material such as Gordy's assembly line analogy, serves to erase the real social relations of production from our perception of Motown, and perpetuates a 'Motown myth' that assumes the label's employees—the songwriters, producers, musicians, and singers—adhered to a strict division of labour. This was true to an extent; some roles were clearly defined, and songs tended to follow a set order in their conception and production. The initial idea for a song, for example, usually came from the songwriters. There was a Quality Control department, where songs were reviewed to check that they met a certain standard, before being granted approval for release. And it is indeed the case that records were generally produced in a short space of time. Nevertheless, it does not necessarily follow that this environment was characterised by a lack of creativity. Fitzgerald challenges the assumption that the Motown record label functioned like a production line, with songwriters and session musicians who were interchangeable, diligently churning out what was expected of them. He cites comments from former Motown employees that testify to the creative independence of various performers and musicians, observing that

> Although much has been made of the control exerted by producers like H-D-H [Holland-Dozier-Holland worked as Motown's main songwriting team for most of the 1960s] over performers in the recording situation (for example, 'A repetitive compositional style that limited the musicians' room for improvisation and gave the producers musical control'), the actual results of such control, however, are not always clear-cut [ … ] to deny the individual contributions of various Motown artists is to overvalue this notion of control. Despite Dozier's 'meticulous' approach to production he also acknowledges that in the case of Marvin Gaye 'we let him do what he felt'. Formulas had to be flexible enough to accommodate the natural styles of different performers.[45]

The creative input of the Motown session musicians (who were collectively known as the Funk Brothers) is especially obscured by the production line analogy or 'Motown myth'. As the 2002 documentary film *Standing in the Shadows of Motown* observed, these musicians have been almost invisible characters in the Motown story.[46] The Funk Brothers were a core group of guitarists, drummers, bassists, pianists, and other musicians whose instrumental proficiency and improvisatory skills formed the building blocks of what has been termed the 'Motown sound': the distinctive musical style, often driven by grooves, that was cultivated by the record label. *Standing in the Shadows of Motown* aimed to rectify the lack of credit these musicians received during Motown's heyday in the 1960s and 70s. Until Gaye's *What's Going On* the names of session

[45] Fitzgerald, 'Motown Crossover Hits', 2–3.
[46] Paul Justman, *Standing in the Shadows of Motown* (Artisan Home Entertainment, 2003).

musicians never featured on liner notes or record sleeves; most fans and critics attributed the 'Motown sound' to the songwriters, rather than the Funk Brothers; and the musicians were often poorly paid. The documentary reveals the creative input that these session musicians brought to the songwriting process, who might, for example, devise a catchy hook based on a chord sequence presented to them by the songwriters. Fitzgerald details recollections from Motown musicians and songwriters, concluding that

> the individual contributions of the Motown session players were not always submerged by the production process. Dozier acknowledges 'a lot of the ideas wouldn't have been possible without the Funk Brothers', and that often after players had filled out a basic idea given by the producers, his reaction was: 'Hey, Did I write that?' James Jamerson, Motown's bass player, challenged the 'cog-in-the-machine' theory. 'They'd let me go on and ad lib. I created, man . . . It was repetitious, but had to be funky and have emotion . . . My feel was always an Eastern feel. A spiritual thing'. In fact, a Motown recording session, particularly when directed by H-D-H (or later Norman Whitfield) was likely to be a very dynamic and communal process. Session players, following minimal directions, would create grooves that became the building blocks for often undefined songs. Lamont Dozier recalls 'we would have parts of songs, like hooks or maybe parts of a verse'. Earl Van Dyke says of H-D-H 'Yeah, they'd come in with about five chords and a feel'. In Jamerson's words 'Yes, they'd give you a chord sheet and say, "You're on your own"'. [ … ] Any analysis of early Motown songs must consider this interactive recording process and its role in song creation and structure.[47]

Further to this, the presumed dichotomy between the two extremes—of complete songwriter control on the one hand, and freely creative improvisation by the performer on the other—is false, at least in the case of Motown. The work of the session musicians shows that the boundary between composer and performer was often blurred, with individual musicians sometimes embodying both roles at once. Popular music production often incorporates fragments of improvisation, with musicians experimenting in order to create material that forms part of the finished song. It would appear that, in this regard, Motown was by no means exceptional.

The fetishised musical object, the star persona of the performing artist or group, and the myth surrounding Motown's mode of production: all serve to alienate Motown's workers (that is, all those employed under Gordy who were directly involved in the creation of the music) from the fruits of their labour. These things obscure the messy and complex social relationships—between songwriters, producers, musicians and artists—that enabled the production of Motown's music. *Standing in the Shadows of Motown* scratches under the surface of the fetishised finished products in order to bring these

[47] Fitzgerald, 'Motown Crossover Hits', 3.

relationships to light, and to highlight the emotional as well as technical and intellectual labour that contributed to the records' production. The documentary includes new interviews in which the Funk Brothers recount personal stories of the friendships, arguments, and emotions that went into the creation of this music. The over-use of Gordy's quotation about the Fordist production line has served to skew the popular and critical reception of Motown, and has only exacerbated the already-present alienation of the musicians from their labour.

If Motown music has commonly been received as overly commercial and manufactured, the critical and scholarly reception to *What's Going On* demonstrates that the record sleeve, thematic content, musical style, and production methods are generally considered to constitute a departure from Motown's standard output. As Lynskey observes,

> The *What's Going On* sessions challenged every tenet of the Motown playbook. Finish a track in an hour or three? Gaye's team worked twelve-hour days. Use the in-house experts? Gaye sought out underdogs such as Motown elevator man James Nyx and local tenor saxophonist Wild Bill Moore. Stay professional? Gaye kept joints and fine Scotch on hand for the coterie of friends that attended the sessions [ … ] Working as his own producer, and inspired by jazz, he loosed the bonds on his musicians to allow for a constant, mercurial shift of creativity, out of which he and arranger David Van de Pitte crafted something unprecedented in Motown: a multivalent personal testament.[48]

The implicit value judgements in this passage are fairly obvious. Lynskey gives the impression that Gaye's album constituted a worthier musical project than Motown's usual output. The description of Gaye's lengthy, informal recording sessions implies that a greater level of care went into the production of *What's Going On*, compared with the apparently systematic, assembly-line production style of other Motown records, and that Gaye failed to adhere to the strict division of labour between composer and performer that Gordy ostensibly sought to preserve.[49] Further to this, Gaye's overseeing of the production of *What's Going On* has been celebrated as signalling an artist gaining creative independence from industry bosses, a move which is generally highly valued in pop music criticism.[50]

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[48] Lynskey, *33 Revolutions per Minute*, 200.
[49] The music journalist Ben Edmonds has noted Gaye's perfectionist attitude regarding the production of *What's Going On*. See Edmonds, *What's Going On?*, passim.
[50] The music journalist Bill Dahl observes that the album 'signalled Gaye's moment of wresting control of his music from the Motown producers, disrupting Gordy's tried-and-tested production-line formula for making records, where labour was strictly divided, and songwriters and artists did not overlap'. Bill Dahl, 'Trouble Man: Marvin Gaye', in *Calling out Around the World: A Motown Reader*, ed. Kingsley Abbott (London: Helter Skelter, 2000), 110–11. The popular music scholar Andrew Flory observes that 'Gaye's use

The more informal production process of *What's Going On* is generally considered to be reflected in the musical style of the album. As Lüthe observes, 'the production style of the album, the music and lyrics, the theme and contents, and the album's artwork signified not only a re-invention of the performer Marvin Gaye, but also the end of classic Motown with its success formula grounded in love ballads embedded in a hybridised pop-R&B musical track'.[51] Critics have observed that Gaye's album sounded soulful and reflective, compared with the light-hearted perkiness that commonly characterised Motown records. Gaye's distinctive sound was achieved partly due to his unprecedented overlapping of multiple vocal textures.[52] Uriel Jones, a Motown session drummer who played on *What's Going On*, commented on Gaye's different approach to sound:

> We felt closer to Marvin than a lot of the other producers. Most producers came in and just wanted to buy what we'd done for them in the past, which wasn't much of a challenge. But Marvin would always come in with something a little different in mind. You never knew what you were going to get with Marvin, and that's why we looked forward to sessions with him. This time, he was so deep into what he was doing that we got deeper into it too. He had his own idea of what he wanted, and we had to work at it—working the Motown out of it, so to speak.[53]

Gaye's album was clearly distinguished from earlier Motown records by its conceptual unity, in terms of both musical and lyrical content. Smith observes that 'the recording refined the idea of a concept album in which all the songs on a long-playing record are interwoven and unified by a cohesive theme', noting that the songs 'were presented as a seamless whole. As the lyrics of one song ended, the instrumental backup melted into the subsequent song with no sound breaks or fade-outs between sets. This continuity gave the recording a musical unity and thematic completeness'.[54] The songs were musically linked, sometimes sharing a harmonic structure (such as in the case of 'What's Going On' and 'Mercy Mercy Me (The Ecology)'), and sometimes directly

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of vocal composition ventured even farther outside of the Motown norm as he gained greater control of his productions during the late 1960s. Beginning with the 1971 album *What's Going On*, Gaye started to produce his own recordings, which allowed him to compose important elements of the music during a session, perform his original compositions directly to tape, and continually edit and refine his work through the process of "punching in" and overdubbing. Although he still relied heavily on the assembly line to create his music, he often used his vocal performances to inspire new material'. Andrew Flory, 'Marvin Gaye as Vocal Composer', in *Sounding out Pop: Analytical Essays in Popular Music*, ed. Mark Stuart Spicer and John Rudolph Covach (Ann Arbor, Mich.: University of Michigan Press, 2010), 68.

[51] Lüthe, *Color-Line and Crossing-Over*, 162.

[52] See Flory, 'Marvin Gaye as Vocal Composer'.

[53] Quoted in Edmonds, *What's Going On?*, 164.

[54] Smith, *Dancing in the Street*, 238.

quoting each other (for example, 'Inner City Blues' features a quotation from 'What's Going On' as a coda). As I intimated in Chapter 1, in popular music, large-scale so-called 'concept albums' are generally regarded to be more resistant to commodification than easily-digestible stand-alone tracks lasting two to three minutes. Finally, Lüthe observes that the photo of Gaye on the cover of *What's Going On* displays a down-to-earth authenticity that contrasts with the polished glamour of the average Motown record sleeve.[55] Gaye stands a rainy urban backyard, staring into the middle distance as if pondering serious matters. His overcoat contrasts with the smart tuxedo usually favoured by male Motown stars on their album covers, as demonstrated by Figures 2.1-2.3.

[55] Lüthe, *Color-Line and Crossing-Over*, 163–64.


Figure 2.1. What's Going On *record sleeve (front)*


Figure 2.2. What's Going On *record sleeve (back)*

*(Images from https://www.amazon.co.uk/Whats-Going-VINYL-Marvin-Gaye/dp/B00006OA8C)*


Figure 2.3. *Record sleeve (front) from The Temptations' 1967 album* The Temptations in a Mellow Mood
*(Image from https://www.amazon.com/Mellow-Mood-Temptations/dp/B00000DBYC)*

Gaye's record is also significant in being the first at Motown to credit the session musicians. *What's Going On* constituted a collaborative effort of around fifty different instrumentalists and vocalists, who (as I have already observed) were not normally credited on the liner notes or record sleeve. By receiving credit on Gaye's record, the workers were exploited to a lesser degree than with other Motown records. Motown's habitual failure to credit session musicians and thereby acknowledge the complex social relationships that contributed to a record's production served to give a shiny, commodified veneer to the finished musical product. This suggests that, in explicitly naming the individual musicians and highlighting these relationships, *What's Going On*'s mode of production is slightly less exploitative than that of the average Motown record.

### 2.3.4 Sticking it to 'The Man' and Black Capitalism

Gaye's album, and the scat singing sections in 'What's Going On' in particular, can be perceived as standing in contrast to—and even presenting anti-capitalist resistance to—the division of labour and rigid musical formulae that ostensibly characterised Motown. This particular narrative undoubtedly holds a certain romantic appeal. I have already outlined, however, that Motown's music and production methods were not so flimsy and manufactured as is commonly presumed; it thus follows that the contrast between *What's Going On* and other Motown records is not so great as the popular narrative suggests. Having unpacked this dominant narrative to reveal a more nuanced picture of Gaye's record and Motown music, we are now able to explore the real implications of Gaye's particular position within Motown records and the wider capitalist landscape. On the issue of creative control and division of labour, for example, we might suggest that, in wresting control of his music from the label's songwriters and producers, Gaye disrupted Gordy's ideal vision of a Motown production line. The production of *What's Going On* is in this sense analogous with the gesture of sticking it to the Man (who in this case was Gordy). Following The Conchords' use of the widely-understood slang term of 'the Man'—a figure who is generally implied to be a Caucasian male—in their parody song, I shall use this term in order to illustrate the shifting relationships between bosses and workers that characterised the production of *What's Going On*. There is a certain irony in Gordy's embodiment of this figure, since the founding of Motown records can itself be considered Gordy's way of sticking it to the (white) Man. Gordy began his career in the music business as a songwriter. His frustration with the scant royalties yielded from this role, and a desire to be his own boss, led him to start his own record company. Motown quickly grew to become one of the most successful record labels of the 1960s: a black-owned company triumphing in an industry that was almost exclusively dominated by white men. Gordy's career trajectory reads like a rags-to-riches tale, as he transformed himself from a lowly worker—first at the Ford car factory, and then as a songwriter—into a record label owner, joining (and in many cases beating) the group of capitalists he was previously subservient to. In joining the ranks of such capitalists, however, we can suggest that Gordy took on the position of the Man relative to his employees at Motown. After all, it was he who controlled the record label, and ultimately took home the profits. Many of the session musicians, meanwhile, worked excruciatingly long hours to produce work that often went uncredited, except in the form of low wages. A major star like Gaye constituted an exception to the rule of Motown musicians, who generally enjoyed little agency in the face of Gordy's management. Because of his position as one of Motown's most lucrative earners, Gaye was able to present a challenge to Gordy's authority. 'What's Going On' is akin to Gaye giving Gordy the middle finger: Gaye recorded a song behind Gordy's back on a subject matter of

which the latter disapproved. Following the commercial success of *What's Going On,* Gaye was rewarded with a million-dollar deal with Motown, making him the label's highest-earning artist. Stevie Wonder constituted another exceptional Motown artist who was able to negotiate his own contract and wrangle creative control from the producers.[56] Unlike most other Motown musicians and artists, Gaye and Wonder were thus able to become their own men, so to speak. It must be remembered, however, that while some workers were allowed to rise to the top of the pile, there were always others who were left behind.

It would be inaccurate to suggest that, relative to other Motown workers, Gaye constituted the figure of the Man in the way that Gordy did. Nevertheless, we might infer that the nature of control he exerted during the production of *What's Going On,* and the privileged position he held at Motown relative to the label's other employees, meant that Gaye came to embody some elements of the Man figure.[57] As I have already noted, Gaye received not only more money than the other musicians who worked on the album, but also more of the credit. After all, Gaye was the one with his name and image on the album cover. Ben Edmonds recounts how David Van De Pitte, who worked as the arranger on *What's Going On*, felt angry with Gaye for stating that he 'conceived every bit of the music' on *What's Going On,* thus failing to acknowledge Van De Pitte's contribution. Edmond notes that this assertion from Gaye 'was pure nonsense; Gaye had help, and inspired help at that, every step of the way. Marvin's Achilles heel creatively was he that [sic] was a supremely collaborative artist whose ego would never let him fully exploit this strength'.[58] We should remember that the creation of *What's Going On*'s title track involved many different players, with Benson and Cleveland contributing to its genesis as well as Gaye. Although the production of the album included the efforts of multiple different workers, the record is glossed over with a facade that gives the illusion of constituting the work of a single person only. This facade partly serves to turn the album into a fetishised commodity, and to alienate all the workers besides Gaye from the result of their labour. But as the star of the album, Gaye is also a fetishised figure.

[56] Lynskey writes that 'on his birthday, Wonder told Berry Gordy that he would only stick with Motown if he were guaranteed complete creative control. Gordy had misgivings—Motown's success to date had been built on not giving artists creative control—but he had no choice. Emboldened by Marvin Gaye's success in making *What's Going On* the way he wanted, Wonder wasn't budging'. Lynskey, *33 Revolutions per Minute*, 258.
[57] Gaye's position cannot simply be equated with Gordy's: Gordy was still the owner of the record label, and Gaye a worker, albeit a worker whose celebrity status meant that he held more influence than the session musicians. Such stratification among workers serves to weaken worker solidarity under capitalism. For a more detailed discussion of the capitalist division of labour, see Harry Braverman and Paul Marlor Sweezy, *Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1974).
[58] Edmonds, *What's Going On?*, 169.

In *What's Going On*, Gaye aimed an attack at capitalist society. But in critiquing the social structure that cultivates the presence of the Man, Gaye acquired wealth, which means that he grew to have more in common with those at the top of the economic pyramid. One song on the album, 'Inner City Blues', critiques the economic and social woes of poor Detroit residents.[59] The following line from the song seems to address the figure of the Man: 'Money, we make it / Before we see it, you take it'. This appears to be a complaint about the level of taxation in the US; perhaps the Man here stands for the American government. At several points throughout his life Gaye experienced trouble for failing to pay his taxes; he spent some time living in exile in Europe as a result. ('I can't pay my taxes' is another lyric from 'Inner City Blues'). As we know, however, he was hardly living in poverty, and the financial difficulty he faced was very different to that experienced by the average resident of inner-city Detroit. It is difficult to see the situation in any other way than Gaye receiving a large income from Motown records, and subsequently refusing to pay some of it back to society in the form of taxes. In this sense, Gaye is like a capitalist overlord, hoarding his wealth from the rest of society. We can thus identify a recurring cycle of figures who embody the role of the Man in the music industry, which indicates that in a capitalist society, this figure must be a constant presence, even if his identity is often shifting. As some workers rise to the top of the economic pile—as first Gordy did, then Gaye—there will always be others left behind at the bottom, bitterly resenting those at the top.

The shifting identity of the Man is dealt with by The Conchords in 'Think About It'. One verse reads:

> Good cops been framed and put into a can.
> All the money that we're making is going to the Man.
> What man?
> Which man?
> Who's the Man?
> When's a man a man?
> What makes a man a man?
> Am I a man?
> Yes. Technically I am.

Looking beyond the tongue-in-cheek humour, it is apparent that The Conchords here contemplate the confusing question of what constitutes 'the Man', asking where the human face of capitalism can be located. For the session musicians at Motown, Gaye

[59] 'Inner City Blues' is available to listen at MarvinGayeVEVO, *Marvin Gaye - Inner City Blues (Make Me Wanna Holler)*, 2011, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=57Ykv1D0qEE.

may have (at least partly) embodied the human face of capitalism; he was the one to instruct them and, in some cases, to organise the payment of their wages.[60] From Gaye's perspective, Gordy may have constituted the figure of the Man, while for Gordy, this figure may have been embodied by his competitors—the other (mostly white) music industry bosses. The Conchords' lyric—'Am I a man? Yes. Technically I am.'—expresses the idea that we all have the potential to become Men, to take on the human face of capitalism, by rising up and joining the capitalist class.

This was essentially the promise of 'black capitalism': that black folk, too, would be able to challenge white folk for a share of the capitalist pie. 'Black capitalism' promoted the idea that racial equality could be attained through African American economic self-help and entrepreneurship. Smith notes that 'Booker T. Washington's Negro Business League advanced the beliefs that laissez-faire economics was colour blind and that racial prejudice could be conquered through entrepreneurial success. Indeed, black capitalism could create an economic base from which other facets of black empowerment could be pursued'.[61] This policy influenced black business owners in Detroit, who sought to gain ownership of the means of production, rather than having their labour power exploited by white bosses, as was so often the case at the automobile factories.[62] Motown can be considered a part of this movement: Gordy chose to stick it to the white man by joining him in capitalist enterprise. Throughout this chapter it has become clear that for Gordy, commercial success took precedence over all else at Motown. A key promise of black capitalism was that it would benefit the whole community, allowing other black folk to rise up out of their socio-economic situation along with the successful businesses.[63] Smith observes that, at first, Motown records appeared to constitute a positive economic force for Detroit's black community:

> During its early years, the Motown Record Company seemed to fulfil the promise that black capitalism could be a tool in the fight for racial justice—particularly in light of Detroit's larger economy. The automobile industry has dominated Detroit's economy since the invention of the horseless carriage. Stories of exploitation, racism, and betrayal pervade histories of African Americans' participation in Detroit's automobile industry. The industry excluded African Americans from controlling the means of production and profited from their labour. Berry Gordy Jr.'s decision to create a hit factory of popular

[60] Memories by various Motown employees involved in the production of What's Going On include Gaye paying for some extra recording sessions out of his own pocket; Gaye negotiating fees for the soloists; and Gaye firing and subsequently re-hiring one of the engineers. Edmonds, *What's Going On?*, 182–89.
[61] Smith, *Dancing in the Street*, 59.
[62] See Smith, 54. Black capitalism went hand-in-hand with the black economic nationalism of Malcolm X.
[63] Smith explains, 'this promise held that a black business, once successful, would always support the local community that produced it. If a company prospered, the wealth would be shared by all through employment and general economic growth'. Smith, *Dancing in the Street*, 16.

> song recordings was a complicated response to the history of African Americans in the automobile industry. Motown's assembly-line production style imitated the auto industry, while its product, music, stood apart from the city's larger economy. In Detroit any product that did not depend upon the automobile industry for its market value involved both risk and possible reward. Motown's product, the music of Detroit's black neighbourhoods, became a particularly powerful example of black economic independence since it relied on black creativity and talent.[64]

Anecdotal evidence certainly suggests that, in its early days, Motown fostered a communal environment, in which Gordy supported and nurtured his employees. Motown's first headquarters constituted a single detached family home; employees have recollected the informal, friendly atmosphere; and the label was often referred to as the 'Motown family'.[65] The lyrics of a number of songs on *What's Going On* have clearly imbibed the spirit of Detroit's community. All this suggests that Motown represented capitalism with a rather friendly face indeed.

Yet as Smith observes, 'Motown ultimately did not uphold the promise of black capitalism'.[66] This was the case on two counts. First, the label's loyalty practices and unwillingness to give employees a fair share of the profits meant that Motown workers were exploited (as well as alienated from their labour, as I have demonstrated above), just like those at the Ford car plant. Second, Motown decided to leave Detroit for Los Angeles in 1972, a move which was seen as a betrayal of the community in which it had been rooted for years. Again, there are parallels with the car factories, which by this time had left Detroit, leaving social and economic devastation in their wake. Motown followed suit, as Gordy followed a more lucrative deal in Los Angeles that enabled the label to branch into film as well as music. Many black Detroit residents were upset and angered by Motown's move; some black radio DJs boycotted the label's songs in protest.[67] Gaye was one of the handful of Motown artists who followed Gordy to California. This can be perceived as a further betrayal of the inner-city Detroit residents whose socio-economic plight had inspired material on *What's Going On*. Smith notes that

> Motown's music—Stevie Wonder's 'Living for the City' or Marvin Gaye's 'What's Going On?' —did make eloquent statements about the plight of black Americans left with the "empty bag" of urban America. Yet, without Motown's cultural presence and financial

[64] Smith, 16–17.
[65] See, for example, Kingsley Abbott, ed., *Calling out around the World: A Motown Reader* (London: Helter Skelter, 2000), passim.
[66] Smith, *Dancing in the Street*, 16.
[67] Smith, 239–40.

> profits invested in the city, the songs could only passively speak about, not actively participate in, Detroit's continuing struggle to create itself anew.[68]

Motown's removal to Los Angeles serves as a reminder that capitalism cannot be used as a tool to remedy social or racial problems, for the simple fact that capitalism is fundamentally self-serving, and a capitalist enterprise is unable to prioritise anything over its profit margins. As Smith observes, 'the history of Motown's origins in Detroit teaches important lessons about the limits of black capitalism and black culture to institute significant social, political, and economic change. Motown's economic success illustrates how capitalism operates by rules that cannot be held to a racial or local community agenda'.[69] Ultimately, Motown did not do much to help the economic prosperity of black Americans. Sixty years after Motown was founded, African Americans still face racial discrimination and economic inequality. Now, Motown is barely recognisable as the independent company it was when it began, having undergone a series of buyouts and takeovers by larger media conglomerates. Gordy's black capitalist venture of sticking it to the Man, then, has ended up being subsumed—and ultimately rendered invisible—by the wave of generic corporate takeover. Smith notes that

> the false promise of black capitalism originates in the faulty assumption that capitalism can be enlisted to remedy racial inequality. Improving the racial conditions of society has never been capitalism's primary objective. On the contrary, as Sugrue stated succinctly in his history of postwar Detroit: 'Detroit's postwar urban crisis emerged as the consequence of two of the most important, interrelated, and unresolved problems in American history: that capitalism generates economic inequality and that African Americans have disproportionately borne the impact of that inequality'. Motown's accomplishments as a black capitalist enterprise emerged from Detroit's postwar urban crisis and, therefore, both complicate and, in the end, affirm Sugrue's assertion.
>
> Motown's achievements complicate discussions about capitalism and race by suggesting other alternatives: what if African Americans, who have disproportionately suffered in free-market economies, are given the opportunity to succeed in capitalism's game of unequal rewards? In its early years Motown seemed to be the perfect case study to explore such a question. But the outcome was no different from any other capitalist endeavour in which the profit motive takes precedence over all other concerns. On the most immediate level, the company's profits were not shared equally among all who participated in the venture. The Holland-Dozier-Holland lawsuit over royalties, which dragged on for years, offers one example of how the company's business fortunes benefited some more than others. On a more global level, Motown's decision to leave

[68] Smith, 246.
[69] Smith, 248.

> Detroit and the community that nurtured it not only participated in the larger process of the deindustrialisation of the city but ultimately created the circumstances that would leave the company vulnerable to corporate takeover in years to come. As Motown decentralised and diversified, it lost its distinctive edge in the recording industry and could no longer compete in the same way against the dominance of the major record labels. Motown's business history proves how difficult it is for black capitalism to survive in the global economy, let alone thrive enough to be able to promote the needs of black America.[70]

*What's Going On* should not necessarily be considered as separate from these narratives. With Gaye embodying aspects of the Man figure, and doing little in practical terms to help poor Detroit residents, his album can perhaps be seen as part of the failed promise of black capitalism.

### 2.3.5 Scat Singing, Creativity, and Commodification

The parodic representation of scat singing in The Conchords' 'Think About It' encapsulates all these tensions present in *What's Going On*—not only the struggle between commercial control and individual creativity, but also the contradictory nature of the false promise of black capitalism. In explicitly signposting the musical process of scat singing (by singing 'this is where we break it down' and 'this is where we build it up now'), The Conchords draw attention to the tension between conventional musical formulae and 'authentic' improvisation. This struggle is present in all music, but especially comes to the fore in soul and jazz.

This chapter has demonstrated that Gaye's *What's Going On* album did not present so great a contrast with other Motown records as critics have tended to assume. Even though it is ostensibly a protest record, *What's Going On* does not represent a significant challenge to the socio-economic status quo. The album is set apart from other Motown records only in its presentation, which has a veneer of anti-capitalist authenticity. The cover image, for example, functions to give the illusion that the album is more down-to-earth than other Motown records, even though there was little material difference in production. The scat singing in 'What's Going On' (and in 'Inner City Blues') serves a similar purpose: it gives the record an improvised feel (even if the scat singing was not, in fact, improvised), revealing a glimpse of the 'raw' creative process, rather than showing only a polished, artificial finished product.

By naming the structure that delineates an apparently improvised scat singing section, The Conchords draw attention to a couple of seemingly paradoxical truths at work in Gaye's original song: that even freely improvised music cannot be without

[70] Smith, *Dancing in the Street*, 255–56.

structure, and that even sections of improvisation can fall victim to commodification. The Conchords point out that, although the section contains an improvisatory impulse, there is nevertheless a set place for it to go in the song: '*this* is where we break it down'. They also note that the improvised section adheres to a standard formula of break-down, followed by build-up. This serves as a reminder that scat singing sections such as this become influenced by conventions that are established as an increasing number of hit songs feature similar passages. This kind of scat singing is thus submitted to the process of mechanised pseudo-individuation until it almost becomes cliched. Such commodification works hand-in-hand with the already-present structural building-blocks of sections such as these. The Concords show that it is possible for such passages to be at once formulaic *and* improvised.

The parodic scat singing draws attention to a tension present in most music, which is formed by a combination of pre-meditated structural concerns and in-the-moment impulses. All improvisation inevitably exists in dialogue with musical convention. Especially in situations with multiple musicians working together, there must be some pre-established guidelines that determine how the music is likely to go. Jazz improvisers usually work from a chord chart, which means the harmonic base constitutes a fixed parameter upon which players can add their own individual improvised melodies. In 'Inner City Blues' the scat singing section lasts around a minute, of which around forty seconds remains poised on the same chord (Db minor), as demonstrated in Table 2.2.

| **Time** | **Chord** |
|---|---|
| 3.20 - 3.30 | Ab major |
| 3.30 - 3.40 | Eb minor |
| 3.40 - 4.18 | Db minor |

Table 2.2. *'Inner City Blues' scat singing section chord chart*

This steady harmonic basis allows the performer ample space for free improvisation. The musical material for one of the most critically acclaimed jazz albums of all time, John Coltrane's *A Love Supreme* (1965), depended upon both the improvisatory skill of the quartet, and the ideas for the album that Coltrane composed before entering the studio. This suggests there is not much difference between the production process of *What's Going On* and other Motown albums on the one hand, and avant-garde jazz (that is generally considered to be more 'authentic') such as Coltrane's on the other. Both result from a productive tension between fixed forms and the improvisation of the musicians.

The satirical scat singing in 'Think About It' can be interpreted as a critique of the inevitable commodification of musical forms over time, even those derived from 'free'

jazz improvisation. In a certain sense, it can be perceived that The Conchords have in fact made things as difficult for themselves as possible, in attempting to critique commodification by making fun of the part of Gaye's song that comes closest to the free improvisatory convention-defying impulse of jazz, and is thus the part of the song that might appear to be most capable of anti-capitalist resistance (or 'sticking it to the Man'). By suggesting that the scat singing section is structured according to tired formulae, however, The Conchords imply that Gaye fails to stick it to the Man in this respect. As a musical concept, improvisation is generally considered to be diametrically opposed to convention, structure, and the recycling of tired formulae. The principle of improvisation is that it should sound different each time. The fact that The Conchords successfully imitate Gaye's apparently improvised scat singing from 'What's Going On' thus poses a problem for this principle: improvisation, after all, is not meant to be imitated.[71] In doing so, The Conchords highlight the ease with which this kind of controlled improvisation can be replicated and commodified, suggesting that the scat singing in Gaye's song, from the perspective of historical distance, constitutes pseudo-individuation.[72] Andrew Flory has noted the importance of Gaye's vocals as a compositional tool in his music of the late 1960s and early 70s.[73] Scat singing arguably represents the voice as a creative force in its rawest form; Gaye's compositional inspiration is coming directly from his body. We can thus suggest that scat singing is one of the most personal and 'authentic' forms of artistic expression. In their parody, however, The Conchords demonstrate how such expression is subsequently subsumed by formal convention. Over time, what were once new musical forms become old, lose their progressive edge, and become increasingly susceptible to co-option by capitalist forces.[74] By the 2000s, scat singing has become a formulaic cliché, its use in pop songs representing a commodification of the jazz impulse. Even the scat singing in 'What's Going On' is thus shown to be complicit in capitalist structures.

The advantage of historical distance allows The Conchords to cynically highlight the tendency of even the most apparently progressive of musical gestures—in this case, scat singing—to become commodified over time. In their parody, it is as if The Conchords share a knowing understanding with the audience, assuming that the audience is by now overly familiar with the tired formula for semi-improvised scat sections in pop songs. This is a nod to the (fairly obvious) truth that Gaye's album might

[71] The scat sections in 'What's Going On' and 'Think About It' are musically similar, both based on triadic and scalic melodic movement.
[72] See Adorno, 'On Popular Music'.
[73] Flory, 'Marvin Gaye as Vocal Composer', passim.
[74] Capitalism's tendency to territorialise and co-opt things and spaces that were previously outside of or opposed to it has been discussed in Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane (New York: Penguin Books, 2009). I suggest that free jazz and improvisation—and scat singing—fell victim to this process.

have sounded new and exciting at the time of its release, yet to our modern ears may sound formulaic, and even banal. With the cynicism that comes from historical distance, scat singing has been downgraded from a progressive force for African American liberation, to its current status as a commodified cliché.

Here we can identity political parallels. I have already mentioned the idea of capitalist realism, which has tainted hope surrounding political protest in the current era, compared with the optimism of 1960s and 70s political radicalism. In this earlier time, the projects of free jazz and free improvisation came with hopeful connotations of anti-racism and anti-capitalism. From the most cynical perspective, these projects, along with Gaye's *What's Going On,* can be said to have failed, since neither racism nor capitalism have been significantly ameliorated. The connection between free jazz and political emancipation, meanwhile, has almost become a cliché in itself. With the advantage of over three decades' hindsight, The Conchords are able to look back on Motown and *What's Going On* as historical phenomena, weighing up the effect they had on society around them. Over thirty years on, none of the socio-political issues that Gaye sang about on his record have much improved, and many of them have deteriorated. Smith suggests that the Motown story ends on a pessimistic note, because it is now apparent that the success of the label did not significantly improve the quality of life for black Americans.[75] The Conchords' 'What's Going On' can thus be considered a cynical commentary on this state of affairs.

## 2.4 Conclusion

Earlier in this chapter I characterised the story of *What's Going On* as a cycle of actors who attempt to stick it to the Man, only to end up themselves embodying the human face of capitalism, and dealing with someone else attempting to resist their authority. It might be suggested that The Conchords poking fun at Gaye's music constitutes a further gesture of sticking it to the Man. This gesture not only implies that Gaye failed in his attempt to effect a meaningful critique of the socio-economic system, but also highlights Gaye as the figure of the Man (by revealing him to have produced commodified and formulaic music). Further to this, The Conchords demonstrate a self-reflexive attitude in their awareness of the inevitability of the cyclical nature of resistance against the human face of capitalism.

Chapter 2 introduced a key potential function of pop parody: the critique of pop music. This function of The Conchords' 'Think About It' presented an opportunity to explore issues in Motown music highlighted by the parody song, particularly the tension

[75] See Smith, *Dancing in the Street*, 251–58.

between commercial interests and pop music as protest. In 'Think About It', a critique of consumerism in the lyrics and a satirisation of formulaic structures in the music combine, to jointly perform a critique of the extent to which consumerism has come to dominate our lives in the late capitalist era. They show that we are so wrapped up in the forces of consumption that we can't escape them even when we try. Gaye could not escape these forces even when he attempted to write politically activist music. Today's citizens in the West, meanwhile, will never be able to overthrow the yoke of capitalism when they continue to succumb to the pleasures of unfettered consumption.

In 'Think About It', The Conchords successfully show an awareness of Žižek's critique that 'they know what they are doing, but they do it anyway'. The multiple layers of self-reflexivity revealed in the parody allow The Conchords to negotiate this obstacle of cynical distance. Chapter 2 thus shows the potential for an effective use of self-reflexivity in pop parody. Chapter 3, in contrast, will demonstrate the limitations of self-reflexivity as critique. Although Chapter 2 addressed issues pertaining to race in *What's Going On* and the story of Motown, the racial dynamics which are inevitably present when two white men imitate a song by a black artist have not been fully explored. Chapter 3 devotes itself to unpacking this issue.

# CHAPTER 3

# PARODIC WHITE RAPPERS AND THE THREAT OF CULTURAL APPROPRIATION

Chapter 3 considers how parody highlights the problem of cultural appropriation in pop music. How do artists attempt to use parody as a tool to overcome the problem of cultural appropriation in pop, and how effective is this tool? The chapter addresses the potentially uncomfortable and regressive implications of The Conchords, who are two white men, imitating a song by a black artist. The Conchords' parody of Marvin Gaye should be considered within the wider context of the duo's treatment of race throughout their television series. The present chapter pays particular attention to the other song featured in the same episode (Season 1, Episode 3: 'Mugged') as 'Think About It', 'Hiphopopotamus versus Rhymenoceros' (hereafter 'Hip v Rhyme'), which parodies white hip hop artists, and thus itself raises many of the problems that arise when white artists perform 'black' music. Analysis of this parody song prompts an exploration into the wider trend of parodic white rappers. The proliferation of parodic and comedic white rappers might suggest that self-reflexive parody can be a useful and effective tool to negotiate the problem of cultural appropriation. The analysis of several case studies, however, reveals this assumption to be false. While the previous chapter showed the potential for parody's self-reflexive cynical distance to be an effective force for progressive critique, the present chapter shows the limits of self-reflexivity as critique, revealing that sometimes cynical distance is insufficient to effectively counter the complex and deep-rooted socio-economic problem of cultural appropriation.

## 3.1 Encounters with the Other in *Flight of the Conchords*

'Mugged' shows The Conchords attempting to negotiate the inescapable fact of their white privilege. The central joke of the episode hinges upon the disjunction between the quotidian lives of privileged white men on the one hand, and the harsh reality of an (implicitly black) 'gangster' experience on the other. Towards the beginning of the episode, Murray expresses concern for Bret and Jemaine's safety when leaving the house at night; he views the streets of New York as a dangerous place. Murray gives the band fluorescent safety belts to wear around the city. Despite—or perhaps because of—the belts, Bret and Jemaine are mugged the next time they go out. The attack, however, is carried out in broad daylight, by a pair of polite white 'gangsters' who appear to be as

hapless and incompetent—and almost as naïve—as The Conchords. It becomes apparent throughout the episode that the muggers' overly sensitive and dim-witted personalities are utterly at odds with their criminal impulse; one of them begins to cry when recounting the story of how he killed a monkey, which seems to constitute the worst crime he ever committed.[1] The similarities between The Conchords and the gangsters are further emphasised by parallels in their storylines: Jemaine bonds with one of the gangsters, John, through their shared experience of their respective best friends (Bret and the second gangster, Mickey) having abandoned them during the mugging.

The mugging of a pair of white men by a second pair of white men, who are almost equally lacking in 'streetwise' credibility, sets the scene for an episode which pokes fun at white folk's failure to perform black culture convincingly. A clear parallel is drawn between the white muggers 'appropriating' a black gangster lifestyle and The Conchords appropriating black music. The episode's two songs parody the quintessential black genres of Motown and hip hop.[2] In 'Hip v Rhyme', Jemaine and Bret adopt their alter-egos of incompetent rap artists, Hiphopopotamus and Rhymenoceros:

> I'm the motherflippin' Rhymenoceros
> My beats are phat and the birds are on my back
> And I'm horny (I'm horny)
> If you choose to proceed you will indeed concede
> Cos I hit you with my flow
> The Wild Rhino Stampede
> I'm not just wild, I'm trained, domesticated
> I was raised by a rapper and rhino that dated
> And subsequently procreated
> That's how it goes
> Here's the Hip-Hopapotamus
> The hip hop hippo
>
> They call me the Hip-Hopapotamus
> My lyrics are bottomless
>
> (Pause)
>
> Sometimes my rhymes are polite
> Like 'Thank you for dinner, Ms. Wright

[1] The verse about monkeys in 'Think About It' might be a reference to this.
[2] The segment of the episode in which 'Hip v Rhyme' is performed is available to watch at r8dkid, *Flight of the Conchords Ep 3 Hiphopopotamus vs. Rhymenoceros*, 2007, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FArZxLj6DLk.

That was very delicious, good night'.
Sometimes they're obscene
Like a pornographic dream
NC-17 with ladies in a
Stream of margarine
Ha ha ha ha ha ha, yeah
Some margarine

[ … ]

Other rappers diss me,
Say my rhymes are sissy.
Why? Why? Why?
Why exactly? What? Why?
Be more constructive with your feedback, please. Why? Why?
Why, because I rap about reality?
Like me and my grandma drinking a cup of tea?
There ain't no party like my nana's tea party
Hey! Ho!

[ … ]

The joke of the song is that Bret and Jemaine are naïve white men who don't 'get' it. They understand neither street culture nor the 'real' world. As Bret points out in the song, reality for him is a grandmother's tea party: 'Why, because I rap about reality?/Like me and my grandma drinking a cup of tea?' This is consistent with The Conchords' characters as hapless, small-town New Zealanders overwhelmed by life in the New York metropolis. In this song and throughout the episode, black urban hip hop culture is portrayed as knowing, in contrast to the ignorance of a small-town white lifestyle.

The Conchords' self-reflexivity with regards to their racial privilege functions as their ticket for parodying black musical genres. Their drawing attention to the issues of white privilege and cultural appropriation, throughout the episode and in 'Hip v Rhyme', might be seen to serve as atonement for their mocking Marvin Gaye elsewhere in the episode. Another episode in the series (Episode 7: 'Drive By') also deals with the question of race, setting the scene for another parody of hip hop ('Too many mother*uckers').[3] The direct engagement with racial themes in episodes that feature black music genres suggests that The Conchords are acutely aware of the sensitive navigation required by white artists who seek to produce music which is still strongly

[3] 'Too many mother*uckers' pokes fun at rap songs that feature so much swearing that a large number of words must be beeped out for the radio edit, rendering the lyrics nonsensical.

associated with black communities—even if this music is produced in a comedic or parodic fashion. The Conchords' vigilance serves as a shield against accusations that they blindly appropriate black culture with little awareness of the fraught political implications of such a move. For a television sitcom, the show's handling of race relations is relatively complex: it addresses the nuanced intersections of race, nationality, and economic privilege, and subverts racial stereotypes in order to challenge the audience's perceptions about racism and xenophobia. In 'Drive By' The Conchords experience discrimination on account of their nationality. A street vendor (portrayed by the Indian American actor Aziz Ansari), who is apparently prejudiced against New Zealanders, refuses to sell fruit to Bret. This leads to the following conversation with The Conchords' friend, Dave:

> Bret: So he wouldn't serve us basically just cos we're from New Zealand.
> Jemaine: Is that the norm?
> Dave: Well, you guys are in America now, and there's a lot of prejudism here, especially towards people like you.
> Bret: What do you mean, people like us?
> Dave: The English and what not. Red coats, the oppressors.
> Jemaine: We're not English.
> Dave: Be that as it may Jemaine, you're pretty much the most disliked race in this whole country.
> Jemaine: What about black people?
> Dave: They don't like you either. Neither do the Chinese, the Asians, the Polish, Russian, Croatians, even the Indians.
> Bret: Yeah but Dave, you're Indian. You hate us?
> Dave: Yeah, sometimes.

This exchange is followed by a montage which shows The Conchords face several visible counts of discrimination in different settings around New York: they are jostled in the street, refused entry to a nightclub, instructed to sit at the back of the bus, and sold a hot dog with no sausage inside. The satirical intent of this sequence is clear from the overt references—such as bus segregation—to the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 60s. The absurdity of witnessing these forms of discrimination—which were really faced by black Americans—directed instead towards white New Zealanders makes it clear that McKenzie and Clement do not actually believe prejudice towards New Zealanders to be on a par with that directed at people of colour.[4] The Conchords combine light-hearted

[4] The absurdity of the idea of such harsh discrimination against New Zealanders is made especially clear by the scenes showing no verbal interaction in The Conchords' encounters of prejudice; there is no way of identifying their New Zealand nationality through visual cues alone, since they blend in with other white Americans.

self-mockery of their home country's insignificance with a satirical subversion of structural racism; the (relatively harmless) incomprehension with which New Zealand is often greeted on the world stage is here exaggerated and re-moulded to become akin to the overt and damaging discrimination experienced by people of colour.[5]

The Conchords' tongue-in-cheek subversion of perceptions about race and the Insider/Outsider binary also manifests in the duo's relationship with Dave. Bret and Jemaine are consistently positioned as underdogs and outsiders compared with Dave, an American of Indian heritage who is clearly at home in US society: he has an American accent and is familiar with New York. The Conchords, on the other hand, are newcomers in the USA, clearly unacquainted with New York, with strong New Zealand accents that stand out among most of the show's other characters, who are American. The incomprehensibility of the New Zealand accent sometimes constitutes the butt of jokes, positioned as an awkward barrier to The Conchords' and Murray's integration into American society. (When Jemaine disappears following the mugging, Murray in his thick New Zealand accent expresses concern that 'he may be dead', to which Dave replies, 'he maybe did what?') Bret's name sometimes causes trouble for his character; one joke centres on Americans hearing his name pronounced in a New Zealand accent and interpreting it as 'Brit'. The kinds of everyday grievances faced by an 'outsider' character—who we might expect to be stereotyped as a person of colour—are here experienced by the white characters, while the person of colour (Dave) apparently has no such trials. The Conchords thus frequently subvert the audience's expectations regarding race, nationality and Otherness. Throughout the 'Drive By' episode, the people of colour (the fruit vendor and Dave) have the upper hand, while the white New Zealanders face discrimination and hardship. In *Flight of the Conchords* white folk are consistently presented as underdogs—whether through showing an exaggerated dismissal of New Zealand, which morphs into a satirical critique of racism; or by emphasising the cultural perception of whiteness as inherently uncool compared with a black gangster lifestyle.

[5] There is some truth to New Zealand's perceived global insignificance. The country is accidentally missed off world maps with worrying frequency. Rhys Darby, the actor who plays Murray in Flight of the Conchords, took part in a tongue-in-cheek spoof video which addresses this, and serves as a tourist campaign to #getnzonthemap. Joanna Whitehead, 'New Zealand Is so Tired of Being Left off World Maps It's Launched a Brand New Ad Campaign', *The Independent*, 2 May 2018, https://www.independent.co.uk/travel/news-and-advice/new-zealand-world-maps-missed-jacinda-ardern-campaign-prime-minister-rhys-darby-a8332236.html.

## 3.2 Self-deprecation as a Strategy for Negotiating Whiteness in Hip Hop

### 3.2.1 Eminem and the Beastie Boys

An acute awareness of racial politics and self-reflexivity about one's own whiteness, as witnessed in The Conchords, is essential for any white artist seeking to participate in hip hop, whether in a parodic or sincere manner. The hip hop scholar Mickey Hess notes that 'because hip-hop remains a resistant culture, and because the dominant culture is white, whiteness stands outside hip-hop as a force that threatens to appropriate its culture. Hip-hop has been, and remains, very conscious of the long-standing threat of appropriation, and of the loss of black control of the music and culture to a white record industry'.[6] In order to gain a welcome admission to hip hop culture, a white artist must negotiate this power dynamic so as not to position themselves as someone who appropriates black culture for their own gain. White artists' credibility in hip hop was significantly damaged by the scandal surrounding Vanilla Ice's fake biography in 1990-2. Following the success of the white rapper's 1990 single 'Ice Ice Baby', which broke hip hop sales records, Vanilla Ice was revealed to have fabricated a biography that detailed his upbringing in lower-class urban Miami, whereas in reality he spent most of his youth in wealthy Dallas suburbs.[7] This led to a widespread discrediting of the rapper, from which his career never recovered. A white rapper deliberately concealing his middle-class identity in order to attain the credibility that enabled him to profit from hip hop culture was received as a wilful affront to hip hop's central authenticating tenets of social struggle and staying true to one's identity. Hess observes that the Vanilla Ice scandal caused a 'separation of whiteness from hip-hop authenticity' and 'effectively excluded white artists from mainstream rap' until Eminem's 1999 album *The Slim Shady LP*.[8]

Hess notes that 'Eminem put forth a very different rhetoric of whiteness'. The rapper uses several different strategies in order to navigate the post-Vanilla Ice hip hop landscape. Through sincere lyrics that detail his 'white trash' upbringing in songs such as 'Cleaning out my Closet', as well as his semi-autobiographical film *8 Mile,* Eminem emphasises his struggle both in the economic hardship he faced growing up, and in gaining acceptance in a genre dominated by African-Americans. He remains acutely aware of his white identity:

[6] Mickey Hess, 'Hip-Hop Realness and the White Performer', *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 22, no. 5 (2005): 365.
[7] For details of the scandal, see Hess, 373–74.
[8] Hess, 362; 365. Hess notes that after House of Pain in 1992, no new white hip hop artist gained a place on Billboard's Hot 100 chart until *The Slim Shady LP*. Idem., 362.

> Eminem not only makes himself conspicuously white, but also shows a critical attention to hip-hop's representations of white privilege. Eminem's lower-class background is key to his authentication, and to his complication of hip-hop's representations of wealthy whites rushing to profit from rap. First, he emphasizes his genuine love of hip-hop and the adversity he faced on his path to a rap career. His lyrics reflect his actual biography within a poor, urban location; at the same time he emphasizes his whiteness to persuade listeners that he does not attempt an imitation of blackness.[9]

As well as sincere lyrics, Eminem also uses parody in order to negotiate the issue of his whiteness. Loren Kajikawa observes that in *The Slim Shady LP* Eminem (as his alter-ego Slim Shady) self-consciously draws attention to his racial identity through parodying obvious tropes of whiteness.[10] Kajikawa suggests that the popularity of *Slim Shady* rested upon Eminem confronting his racial identity head-on. (The author compares this with Eminem's less successful earlier attempt to transcend racial boundaries by ignoring the question of race in his relatively unknown 1996 debut album *Infinite.*) In the music and video for one song on *The Slim Shady LP*, 'My Name Is', the rapper's marking of whiteness through an exaggerated representation of cultural stereotypes serves to reverse the dominant racial hierarchy in which whiteness constitutes the invisible norm and blackness is marked as Other.[11] In doing so, Eminem acknowledges the inverted racial positions in hip hop, where black, not white, is the status quo—thus showing an awareness of his Othered racial status within the genre. But in this act of deliberately marking his racial identity, Eminem is careful to give himself a lowered status, mostly through emphasising his lower class background: 'Rather than attempting to shed his whiteness or imitate conventional portrayals of blackness, Eminem emphasised his racial identity in ways that transformed it into something more than a trope of domination. By focusing on his class identity and various unflattering stereotypes of whiteness, Eminem positioned himself as an underdog'.[12] In the video for 'My Name Is', Eminem adopts multiple characters, all of whom constitute stereotypes of whiteness, including

> Eminem as a mental patient in a straight-jacket; Eminem as the entire Brady Bunch; Eminem as a ventriloquist's dummy; Eminem as a flasher in a trench coat; Eminem as 'white trash' appearing in boxers and a white t-shirt in front of a mobile home; Eminem as the president of the United States, Bill Clinton; Eminem as shock-rocker Marilyn

[9] Hess, 383.
[10] Loren Kajikawa, 'Eminem's "My Name Is": Signifying Whiteness, Rearticulating Race', *Journal of the Society for American Music* 3, no. 3 (2009): passim.
[11] Ruth Frankenberg characterises whiteness as 'unmarked marker' and 'empty signifier', explaining that 'whiteness makes itself invisible precisely by asserting its normalcy, its transparency, in contrast with the marking of others on which its transparency depends'. Frankenberg, 'Introduction', 15; 6.
[12] Kajikawa, 'Eminem's "My Name Is"', 365.

> Manson; Eminem as a drunk driver being arrested on the television show *COPS I* […] All told, we witness a kitchen-sink parody that takes aim at white identity.[13]

None of these identities paint particularly flattering portraits of whiteness. As Kajikawa observes, 'parodying common understandings of whiteness, Eminem advanced a white identity both at ease with black culture and humble before it'.[14] This attitude of self-deprecation serves as Eminem's defence against accusations of appropriation, by ensuring that the rapper does not appear as a rich white man trying to profit from the artefacts of black culture.

Alongside his emphasis on self-deprecation, Eminem acknowledges his white privilege and the role it played in his commercial success. As Hess observes:

> On 'White America', Eminem rhymes, 'Look at my sales, let's do the math, if I was black, I would've sold half.' He acknowledges his marketability to white listeners even as he credits Dre [Dr. Dre is the African-American producer who launched Eminem's career] with authenticating him: 'Kids flipped when they knew I was produced by Dre, that's all it took, and they were instantly hooked right in, and they connected with me too because I looked like them'. Eminem attributes his hip-hop credibility to Dre's sponsorship, and his commercial appeal to his white identity.[15]

In 'Without Me', Eminem 'works to diffuse his listeners' rejection of a white artist by anticipating their arguments'[16] by rapping:

> I'm the worst thing since Elvis Presley
> To do black music so selfishly
> And use it to get myself wealthy
> There's a concept that works
> Twenty million other white rappers emerge

Hess notes that 'in these lyrics, Eminem is critical of the broader racial landscape that frames hip-hop, and the structures of racial advantage which have historically seen whites profit from black-created forms of music'.[17] Eminem demonstrates a sophisticated understanding of the complex and contested position of whiteness in hip hop, implicating himself in this critique. It is this intense and persistent examination of self which has ensured his avoidance of the criticism surrounding cultural appropriation

[13] Kajikawa, 351.
[14] Kajikawa, 347.
[15] Hess, 'Hip-Hop Realness and the White Performer', 384.
[16] Hess, 382.
[17] Hess, 382.

that was levelled at Vanilla Ice, while gaining a level of popularity with both black and white audiences unprecedented in hip hop.

Dan Leberg explains that white rappers find success by staying true 'to their own experience and maintaining authenticity and credibility within the rap community'.[18] The all-white rap group Beastie Boys managed to gain both commercial success and credibility within hip hop culture by creating their own unique style of hip hop rather than attempting a straightforward imitation of a black musical form.[19] As Kajikawa explains:

> Perhaps the closest point of comparison to Eminem's use of parody, however, can be found in the crossover success of the first platinum-selling rap album in history: the Beastie Boys' *Licensed to Ill* (1986). In the songs 'No Sleep till Brooklyn' and 'Fight for Your Right (to Party)', the group delivered their raps over a simple rock backbeat and distorted electric guitar, the stereotypical sound of white youth culture in the 1980s. The content of these songs, particularly 'Fight for Your Right (to Party)', seemed to take an ironic stab at the apathy and narcissism of privileged white youth. (How many of their young listeners were in on the joke is another question.) In any case, the strategy paid off by attracting young white fans to rap music and helping the group avoid charges that they were simply imitating African American performers. As African American rapper Q-Tip explains, 'You know why I could fuck with [the Beastie Boys]? They don't try to be black. They're just themselves'.[20]

Unlike Vanilla Ice, Eminem and the Beastie Boys displayed sensitivity towards the problem of cultural appropriation by using the strategies described above, all of which show the rappers acknowledging their own whiteness, thus holding true to their own identity and respecting the dictum of hip hop authenticity.

### 3.2.2 Parodic White Rappers

Aside from The Conchords, several other white parody artists have self-reflexively engaged with the issue of white rappers by donning self-deprecating personae. Jon Lajoie, Weird Al Yankovic and The Lonely Island have produced songs that draw attention to the rappers' racial identity by exaggerating white stereotypes, many of which play on the identity of the nerd and the mundanity of a middle-class lifestyle.[21]

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[18] Dan Leberg, 'Self-Reflexive Whiteness: White Rappers, and the Nerds Who Mock Them', *Gnovis* 13, no. 1 (30 November 2012), http://www.gnovisjournal.org/2012/11/30/self-reflexive-whiteness-white-rappers-and-the-nerds-who-mock-them/.

[19] The Beastie Boys were active from the early 1980s through to the 2010s.

[20] Kajikawa, 'Eminem's "My Name Is"', 348.

[21] See, for example, alyankovicVEVO, *'Weird Al' Yankovic - White & Nerdy (Official Video)*, 2009, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N9qYF9DZPdw; JonLajoie, *Everyday Normal Guy*, 2007, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5PsnxDQvQpw. The Lonely Island have produced several hip hop parodies that draw attention to whiteness, including Saturday Night Live, *SNL Digital Short: Lazy Sunday*,

Lajoie's 'Everyday Normal Guy' (2007) and 'Everyday Normal Guy 2' (2008) focus implicitly on the idea of middle-class whiteness as norm, by rapping about the banal details of this position:

> I'm just a regular everyday normal guy
> I get nervous in social situations, motherfucker!
> I'm just a regular everyday normal guy
> I get constipated once a month, motherfucker!
> I'm just a regular everyday normal guy
> And I make pretty good spaghetti sauce, motherfucker![22]

Lajoie emphasises the stable family background that apparently typifies middle-class white folk in America, presenting a contrast with the stereotype of the 'broken' family home that pervades popular discourse regarding black Americans:

> I'm just a regular everyday normal guy
> My parents are really nice people, motherfucker![23]

> I'm from a lower-middle class family
> Me and my brothers and sisters played hide-and-seek
> I have good memories from my childhood, bitch[24]

The addition of a nerdy persona to this uneventful middle-class existence further emphasises the distance between whiteness and blackness. Lori Kendall observes that the character of the nerd presents an obvious and immediate contrast with an urban black 'gangster' lifestyle: the two respective identities are considered almost polar opposites in their signifying features of class and masculinity.[25] In parody songs by white rappers, the comedy is generated by the disconnect between white nerdiness as tragically uncool and the black gangster experience as the height of street credibility. In 2006 Yankovic released 'White and Nerdy', parodying Chamillionaire's hit rap song 'Ridin' Dirty', which addresses the fraught relationship between black men and police,

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2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sRhTeaa_B98; Saturday Night Live, *SNL Digital Short: Natalie Raps*, 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-A0iftflme4; TheLonelyIslandVEVO, *The Lonely Island - I'm On A Boat (Explicit Version) Ft. T-Pain*, 2009, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=avaSdC0QOUM; thelonelyisland, *Diaper Money*, 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3V35jvY0u7I.

[22] JonLajoie, *Everyday Normal Guy*.

[23] JonLajoie.

[24] JonLajoie, *Everyday Normal Guy 2*, accessed 22 June 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GmG4X9PGOXs.

[25] Lori Kendall, '"White and Nerdy": Computers, Race, and the Nerd Stereotype', *Journal of Popular Culture* 44, no. 3 (2011): 505–24, passim.

referring to the police's hope of finding the men 'ridin' dirty' with illegal substances in the car.[26] Yankovic's song and accompanying video emphasise his persona as a stereotypical geek, whose hobbies include comic books, computers, and chess, and who idolises intellectual figures like Stephen Hawking:

> I wanna roll with the gangstas
> But so far they all think I'm too white and nerdy
>
> [ … ]
>
> First in my class here at M-I-T
> Got skills, I'm a champion at D and D
> M.C. Escher, that's my favourite M.C.
> Keep your forty, I'll just have an Earl Grey tea
> My rims never spin, to the contrary
> You'll find that they're quite stationary
> All of my action figures are cherry
> Stephen Hawking's in my library
>
> [ … ]
>
> I'm nerdy in the extreme
> Whiter than sour cream
> I was in AV club, and glee club
> And even the chess team
> Only question I ever thought was hard
> Was 'Do I like Kirk, or do I like Picard?'
> Spend every weekend at the Renaissance Fair
> Got my name on my underwear[27]

The lyrics construct the nerd figure as socially awkward, pursuing his hobbies and intellectual pursuits in isolation (Yankovic is never shown among friends in the video, whereas the 'cool' black characters are paired together). There is an implied autobiographical element to this video by Yankovic, who is a skinny white man. Kendall notes that 'tying his own identity to that of his nerdy character in the song and video, Yankovic commented that "This is a song I was born to write. I've been doing research my entire life."'[28] The artist's self-reflexive exaggeration of his real-life persona

[26] Kendall, 'White and Nerdy', 511.
[27] alyankovicVEVO, *'Weird Al' Yankovic - White & Nerdy (Official Video)*.
[28] Kendall, 'White and Nerdy', 511.

constitutes a strategy used to implicitly address Yankovic's own white privilege as he parodies black music, a responsibility which, as the examples of Vanilla Ice and Eminem demonstrate, is crucial for any white rapper.

The Lonely Island have released several hip hop parodies that emphasise the white rapper's lack of street credibility compared with their black counterpart. The musical comedy group is comprised of three white men—Andy Samberg, Akiva Schaffer and Jorma Taccone—who rose to fame in 2005 with their *Saturday Night Live* 'digital short' video 'Lazy Sunday'.[29] The song features aggressive rapping about the quotidian pursuits of two white men (Samberg and the comedian Chris Parnell, who play themselves) on a Sunday afternoon, including buying their favourite cupcakes and going to see the popular fantasy film *The Chronicles of Narnia* at the cinema:

> Lazy Sunday, wake up in the late afternoon
> Call Parnell just to see how he's doin'
> *Hello?* What up, Parns? *Yo, Samberg, what's crackin'?*
> You thinking what I'm thinking? **Narnia!** Man, it's happenin'
> *But first, my hunger pains are sticking like duct tape*
> Let's hit up Magnolia and mack on some cupcakes
> *No doubt that bakery's got all the bomb frostings*
> I love those cupcakes like McAdams loves Gosling
>
> [ … ]
>
> It's the Chronic—what?—cles of Narnia
> Yes, the Chronic—what?—cles of Narnia
> We love that Chronic—what?—cles of Narnia[30]

Although the song contains more references to mainstream popular culture—such as the romance film *The Notebook*, starring Rachel McAdams and Ryan Gosling—than to the specific pursuits of a nerdy subset of white youth, the video is clearly intended to emphasise the protagonists' lack of street credibility, by highlighting their enthusiasm for vapid cultural pursuits and food items such as cupcakes. (The song also features a prolonged debate between Samberg and Parnell about which online map service they should use to locate the cinema.)

In both 'Lazy Sunday' and 'Everyday Normal Guy', comedy is effected by the contrast between the style of rap, which is often confrontational and intense, and the low

[29] For an introduction to the parody videos of The Lonely Island, see Spirou, 'The Lonely Island's "SNL Digital Short" as Music Video Parody'.
[30] Saturday Night Live, *SNL Digital Short*, 2013. In the first verse the roman lyrics are spoken by Samberg, the italicised lyrics by Parnell, and the bold lyrics in unison.

stakes of the mundane topics that are rapped about. In 'Everyday Normal Guy' Lajoie ends each chorus line with 'motherfucker!', an exclamation which is incongruous with the banal statements that precede it, such as 'I make pretty good spaghetti sauce, motherfucker!' In 'Lazy Sunday' the duo aggressively shout all the lyrics (the name of the film in the chorus is interrupted by an exclamation of 'what?!') while staring intensely into the camera and imitating the hand gestures of sincere rappers, specifically the Beastie Boys.

The comedy videos by The Lonely Island, Lajoie and Yankovic highlight the white rappers' sexual and romantic incompetence, contrasting with the boastful sexual prowess of many sincere black hip hop artists. In 'Everyday Normal Guy', Lajoie raps:

> And I'm not very good with the women
> I'm a pretty shy person and I'm average lookin'
> Last time I had sex was in 2003
> And I am ashamed to admit, but it wasn't free

'Diaper Money', another rap parody by The Lonely Island, features a verse about sex (or lack thereof) in a monogamous relationship. The tongue-in-cheek use of 'pussy', here combined with the prefix 'wife' to create the incongruous term 'wife pussy', presents a clear contrast with the way in which the word is often used in rap to emphasise the objectification of women. Genuine rappers boast of their sexual dominance of numerous different women in a way which implies sex is easily obtained for them.[31] In 'Diaper Money', the standard use of 'pussy' is subverted by its use in phrases which condone respect for the boundaries of a monogamous relationship. Here, the gendered power dynamics are reversed: the woman is shown to be in control by her power to withhold sexual consent.[32]

> I got that wife pussy on lock, 24-7
> Whenever she lets me, I'm in same-pussy heaven
> And the best part about it
> Is no one else can have it
> And also I can't have it
> Unless she says I can
> I see a girl on the street
> And I can't, so I won't

[31] See, for example, 'Ain't No Pussy Like' (1991) by 2 Live Crew, which lists the quality of 'pussy' in many different locations around the USA, emphasizing the artists' considerable sexual experience. The main body of the song begins with the line 'Ain't no pussy like Miami pussy cos New York pussy ain't shit'.
[32] Of course, if a woman's sexuality is the sole source of her power, this hardly signifies true liberation.

See my wife at home and I would
But she hates my guts[33]

In 'White and Nerdy', Yankovic jokes that the closest he comes to a romantic relationship is spending his nights with a roll of bubble wrap. All these examples exaggerate the implied underwhelming mundanity of the sexuality of a middle-class heterosexual white man.[34]

The comedic rappers analysed above, like The Conchords and Eminem, draw attention to the problem of cultural appropriation in white rap by producing parodic songs in which they construct themselves as the naïve underdog. Collectively these songs constitute an overstated guideline which preaches that white rappers only need submit themselves to self-deprecation in order to be absolved from the cultural insensitivity of performing black music. The considerable popularity of The Conchords, The Lonely Island, Weird Al Yankovic and Jon Lajoie indicates that the cultivation of a tongue-in-cheek nerdy persona gives white artists the license to appropriate whatever musical style they choose, since it ensures that whiteness is always the butt of the joke.[35]

### 3.2.3 Nerdcore

The 'white and nerdy' identity finds another outlet in a sincere sub-genre of rap known as nerdcore. Like the other white rappers discussed in this chapter, nerdcore artists position themselves as underdogs, in terms of both their position within black-dominated hip hop, and their lack of social standing in wider society, including white mainstream culture. Kendall explains that 'nerdcore rappers dis the ''pimps'' and ''gangstas'' of mainstream rap, but use ironic self-deprecation to avoid the appearance of racism'.[36] Like Yankovic's 'White and Nerdy', MC Frontalot's 'Nerdlife' expounds the nerd's interest in computers.[37] The key difference between the two songs, however, is that the latter's lyrics are sincere, rather than intended as a joke:

Nerdlife: you already dwell there.
Frontalot is right beside you, thick glasses, no hair.
I work a desk job, making rap songs for internet.
I take my hacking with me in the off hours

[33] thelonelyisland, *Diaper Money*.
[34] Both Lajoie and The Lonely Island have produced songs in which the characters mock themselves for ejaculating prematurely: 'Too Fast' and 'Jizz in my Pants' respectively (though neither song is in the style of hip hop).
[35] The Lonely Island have 6.7 million YouTube subscribers; Yankovic has 1.4 million, and his 2014 album *Mandatory Fun* reached number one on the *Billboard 200* album chart.
[36] Kendall, 'White and Nerdy', 519.
[37] 'Nerdlife' is a tongue-in-cheek alternative to 'thug life', the hip hop term popularised by Tupac Shakur.

like I'm itinerant. Bindle stick, sack full of big noggin.
Doesn't matter what I code in, keep it logged in.
Got the sock puppet on Hacker News to back me up.
I hack the traffic lights, traffic jams could fast erupt.
I hack a game of checkers, move out of phase with the board.
Hack reality, the rules are ignored.
This is nerdlife, underscored by many aptitudes.

Nerdcore rappers proudly reclaim the label of 'nerd', which is usually considered to be a derogatory term.[38] Calling oneself a 'nerd' thus might be seen as an act of self-deprecation, even while nerdcore rappers boast about their formidable computer skills. As Kendall notes: 'Nerdcore artists thus position mainstream black rappers as the people with power and themselves as oppressed. A trailer for the documentary *Nerdcore for Life* begins with the nerdcore rapper Monzy explaining: "Ladies and gentlemen, it's hard out there for a pimp. But it's even harder out there for a nerd. Us nerds are the oppressed and the downtrodden."'[39] Despite this tongue-in-cheek speech by Monzy, and unlike The Conchords and other comedic white rappers, nerdcore artists are set apart from The Conchords and other comedic white rappers because they do not intend to present a parody or critique of hip hop. As Amanda Sewell explains:

> Nerdcore artists frequently express gratitude toward their hip-hop influences and insist that they take their parent genre seriously. As MC Frontalot has said, 'I was worried that I would run into people who think I'm making fun of hip-hop, and no one has had that response. I don't find hip-hop absurd in any way'. Monzy explains, 'I've always looked at nerdcore as an homage. I've always thought, 'Wow, I wish I was as cool as these rappers I've listened to'. Their musical contributions reflect their own experiences rather than imitating or attempting to identify with a culture of which they are not a part. Nerdcore rappers represent their own experience and culture within the musical confines of a genre they respect.[40]

Through their unabashed presentation of their own authentic identity, nerdcore artists have gained respect in the wider hip hop community. Sewell continues:

> Nerdcore hip-hop's respect for hip-hop is frequently returned by other hip-hop artists. In fact, legendary hip-hop producer Prince Paul has said that nerdcore is 'keeping it real'

[38] It should be noted, however, that the reputation of the nerd has been redeemed in recent years by the figure's increased representation as the protagonist(s) in popular television sitcoms such as *The IT Crowd* (which began in 2006) in the UK and *The Big Bang Theory* (2007) in the USA.
[39] Kendall, 'White and Nerdy', 517.
[40] Amanda Sewell, 'Nerdcore Hip-Hop', in *The Cambridge Companion to Hip-Hop*, ed. Justin A. Williams (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 228.

> more than many other genres of hip-hop: 'I don't think [nerdcore] has anything to do with appropriation of black culture. I think it's going back to originally what I think hip-hop was all about, and that's to be yourself and talk about what you're into, not what the masses are into. For those guys to do what they do takes a lot of guts . . . Whoever is doing it is actually being honest and keeping real to themselves. You can't beat it. To me, that's true hip-hop'.[41]

Here again, the extent to which one 'keeps it real' with regards to one's identity is revealed to be an important measure when deciding who is allowed to take inspiration from black music.

Hip hop music is authenticated through the real-life social struggles it gives voice to. For black rappers this struggle (generally) manifests in economic and racial terms, while the struggle of the nerdy white rapper manifests on a social level, pertaining to their 'uncool' reputation, lack of sexual prowess, and social exclusion as teenagers. All these examples of white rappers—mainstream artists such as Eminem, parody acts such as The Conchords and Lajoie, and fringe nerdcore artists—have helped to establish the figure of the (often nerdy) white male underdog as a credible persona.

### 3.2.4 The Conchords' Parody of Eminem and the Beastie Boys

A number of gestures in the music and lyrics of 'Hip v Rhyme' suggest that The Conchords present a deliberate parody of sincere white rappers, namely Eminem and the Beastie Boys. There are several musical similarities between 'Hip v Rhyme' and 'My Name Is'. Both songs include sections in which the rappers introduce themselves in an exaggeration of polite middle-class whiteness.[42] Eminem's repetition of 'my name is …' at the start and end of the song (leading to the eventual declaration of 'my name is … Slim Shady') has a similar rhythmic structure to The Conchords' repetition of 'I'm the motherflippin' … ' which ends 'Hip v Rhyme'.[43] Both sections feature an interplay between the bass line and the spoken rap lyrics. In each song, the bass line (and a vocal declamation of 'hi!' in the first three bars of 'My Name Is') marks the first beat of the bar, while the vocal line offers a syncopated counter-rhythm, with an emphasis on the third beat of the bar (see Examples 3.1 and 3.2).

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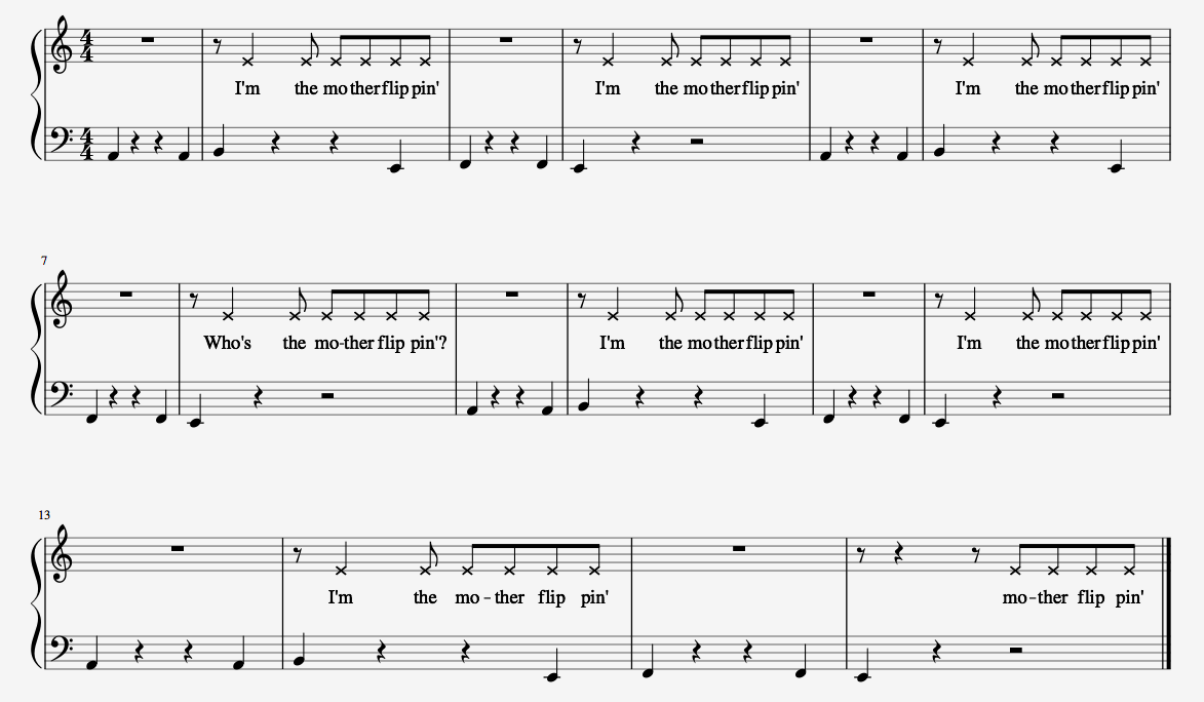
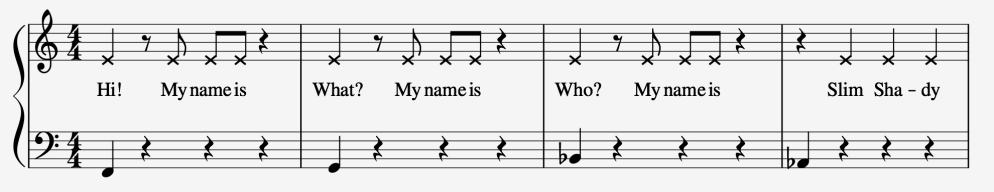
[41] Sewell, 229.

[42] Sincere rappers often introduce themselves in their lyrics with a rap persona which is different to their birth name. The Conchords mimic this direct expression of one's identity, as do many Nerdcore artists (the lyrics of 'Nerdlife' quoted above include the line 'Frontalot is right beside you') and Jon Lajoie in 'Everyday Normal Guy' ('I'm just a regular everyday normal guy'). Kajikawa observes, however, that Eminem's repetition of 'Hi, My Name Is' 'is about as "square" and "standard" a way as one could imagine to introduce oneself. Eminem's "Hi," enthusiastically shouted on the downbeat, drips with forced sincerity'. Kajikawa, 'Eminem's "My Name Is"', 349.

[43] The Conchords' use of the word 'motherflippin'' is an example of the band's too-polite attempt to fit in with 'gangster' culture.




Example 3.1. *'Hip v Rhyme' ending (transcription by author)*




Example 3.2. *'My Name Is' introduction and ending (transcription by author)*

Several other elements of 'Hip v Rhyme' mark out the song as a parody of Eminem's music. Jemaine's tongue-in-cheek satirisation of the notorious misogyny of rap lyrics ('Yes, sometimes my lyrics are sexist/But you lovely bitches and hos should know I'm trying to correct this') can be read as a specific critique of Eminem's widely-acknowledged sexism.[44] We might suggest that, as a white rapper insecure about his racial identity within a genre dominated by black men, Eminem has gone to an extreme effort to adopt the sexist norm of hip hop in order to assimilate into it. Vincent Stephens

[44] For accounts of Eminem's sexism (and homophobia), see Ronald Weitzer and Charis E. Kubrin, 'Misogyny in Rap Music: A Content Analysis of Prevalence and Meanings', *Men and Masculinities* 12, no. 1 (1 October 2009): 12; and Lindsay R. Calhoun, '"Will the Real Slim Shady Please Stand Up?": Masking Whiteness, Encoding Hegemonic Masculinity in Eminem's Marshall Mathers LP', *Howard Journal of Communications* 16, no. 4 (1 October 2005): 267–94.

argues that Eminem's 'often-explicit depictions of genderphobia, violence, misogyny, homophobia' enabled him to gain credibility in hip hop culture.[45] By writing lyrics that are often more violently misogynist than those of many other rappers, Eminem's presence in hip hop has only served to exacerbate the genre's problem with sexism.[46] Jemaine's lyrics here indicate a self-reflexivity that proves to be fruitless: an apologetic acknowledgement of rap's misogyny is followed by a failed attempt to alleviate it. This suggests that the debate surrounding hip hop's treatment of women is by now a tired one; sexism in the genre is by now so well established that rap artists should be perfectly aware of the problems in their lyrics and know how to correct them, yet they seem unable to do so.[47] 'Hip v Rhyme' also makes a parodic reference to the Beastie Boys. In the music video for their 1998 track 'Intergalactic', the Beastie Boys rap while wearing fluorescent bands round their torsos, which are almost identical to the safety band worn by Bret during the performance of 'Hip v Rhyme' in the television episode.

The Conchords' direct references to white, as opposed to black, rappers might be perceived as an attempt for the duo to distance themselves from the accusation of cultural appropriation. If The Conchords were charged with this accusation, they can point to Eminem and argue that they are simply copying a white rapper who imitated black music before them. This double layer of whiteness—and of parody—that lies on top of the initial base of black hip hop music functions as a protective shield to deflect allegations of cultural appropriation.

## 3.3 Self-reflexivity and Cultural Appropriation in White Rap

### 3.3.1 Lil Dicky and White Privilege

This chapter has outlined the necessity of sincere white rappers demonstrating an acute awareness of their own racial identity in order to gain acceptance in hip hop. The Conchords then add a further layer of knowingness by parodying the already self-reflexive gestures of Eminem and the Beastie Boys. It is notable that The Conchords choose to satirise white artists who have demonstrated an exceptional level of self-

[45] Vincent Stephens, 'Pop Goes the Rapper: A Close Reading of Eminem's Genderphobia', *Popular Music* 24, no. 1 (January 2005): 25.
[46] Weitzer and Kubrin observe that 'Eminem's unbridled hostility toward all women, including relatives, is somewhat extreme but not unique in this music genre'. Weitzer and Kubrin, 'Misogyny in Rap Music', 12.
[47] Almost two decades since Eminem's The Slim Shady LP, hip hop music continues to spark controversy regarding its treatment of women. See Kiana Konders, 'Hip Hop's Misogyny Problem Keeps Getting Worse', *Mass Appeal*, 27 July 2017, https://archive.massappeal.com/misogyny-in-hip-hop/; Dorian Lynskey, 'Blurred Lines: The Most Controversial Song of the Decade', *The Guardian*, 13 November 2013, http://www.theguardian.com/music/2013/nov/13/blurred-lines-most-controversial-song-decade; Tanya Horeck, '#AskThicke: "Blurred Lines," Rape Culture, and the Feminist Hashtag Takeover', *Feminist Media Studies* 14, no. 6 (2 November 2014): 1105–7.

reflexivity regarding their own racial otherness within the genre. Vanilla Ice might have been a more obvious target of satire. But if Eminem has already drawn attention to the issues of cultural appropriation and white privilege—sometimes through the medium of parody—what more can The Conchords (and other parodic white rappers such as Lajoie and The Lonely Island) add to this critique? Is self-reflexivity—and, in the case of The Conchords, multiple layers of self-reflexivity—alone enough to alleviate the problem of cultural appropriation? The next part of the chapter confronts two problems with this apparently unending cycle of self-reflexivity and self-deprecation performed by white rappers, arguing that: first, it gives white rappers a license to take what they want from black culture (even, apparently, the 'N-word') without being accused of colour-blind ignorance; and second, it does not prevent white folk from profiting financially from black culture.

A knowing attitude of self-deprecation has become a lazy trope adopted by white rappers, which functions as a free pass that grants them unlimited access to hip hop culture. This is most clearly evident in the output of the white rapper Lil Dicky (whose real name is David Burd). Although Lil Dicky's lyrics are frequently humorous, he has indicated a desire to be taken seriously as a rapper, rather than being pigeon-holed into the category of musical comedy.[48] He is obsessively preoccupied with the fact of his own whiteness and the effect it has on his participation in hip hop culture. Namely, he is anxious that he does not possess the urban street credibility of black rap artists which would apparently lend him authenticity as a rapper.[49] Sam Rosen observes that Lil Dicky is 'constantly lamenting the fact that he is not black while simultaneously celebrating the spoils of white privilege'.[50] In 'White Dude' (2013) the rapper spends much of the song drawing attention to his own white (and male) privilege:

> I ain't gotta worry where the cops at
> I ain't gotta wear a fucking bra strap
> Me and the crew
> Are really doing everything that we like to
> Man it's a damn good day to be a white dude

[48] In 'Professional Rapper' (2015), Lil Dicky is interviewed by Snoop Dogg for a job as a rapper, emphasising his aim to join the ranks of sincere rappers. Unlike many of the comedic rappers mentioned in this chapter, Lil Dicky displays proficiency in rapping. He also raps with a drawl which sometimes renders his lyrics difficult to understand. For musical comedians, on the other hand, it is important to clearly enunciate lyrics in order to communicate the joke. Lil Dicky, *Lil Dicky - Professional Rapper (Feat. Snoop Dogg)*, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LlU4FuIJT2k.
[49] Like Eminem, Lil Dicky readily adopts the misogynist norms of hip hop culture. In 'Freaky Friday' he collaborated with Chris Brown, a rapper who has been embroiled in cases of domestic violence and sexual harassment. In his videos Lil Dicky frequently positions women as sexual objects (in the cartoon video for 'Professional Rapper' Snoop Dogg's black female secretary performs oral sex on Lil Dicky during his interview) and refers to women as 'bitches' and 'hos'.
[50] Sam Rosen, 'Nothing Was the Same: On Drake and the White Boy Imaginary', *The College Hill Independent*, 4 November 2013, http://www.theindy.org/181.

[ … ]

I ain't black or Dominican, not Hispanic or Indian
So imprisonment is not a predicament, I envision
For a white boy

[ … ]

Where I'm eating when I'm high's where they eat at to survive (food chains)

[ … ]

And on top of that I'm white
Which is like, amazing because
Everybody naturally assumes I'm a great person
I get a fair shot at the life I deserve
I mean I could underachieve my way into any college in the country[51]

Lil Dicky uses racial stereotypes to emphasise the structural advantages he enjoys as an upper-middle-class white man. In this song, class difference implicitly corresponds with racial difference: black people are stereotyped as poor (they regularly eat at food chains), while white folk are assumed to be affluent.[52] Lil Dicky ends 'White Dude' by lamenting the fact that he is not permitted to say the 'N-word' in his music:[53]

[51] Aj Leo, *Lil Dicky White Dude Official Video By Aj Leo*, accessed 22 June 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8VE4lVtZuh8; For Lil Dicky's dissection of white identity, see also LD Lyrics, *Lil Dicky - How Can I Become a Bawlaa LYRIC VIDEO*, accessed 13 June 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mnCzlLUw6kU; LilDickyVEVO, *Lil Dicky - White Crime (Official Video)*, accessed 22 June 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-7eA_TyogeU.

[52] Although poverty in the USA is experienced by people of all races and ethnicities, Lil Dicky's generalisation has a strong factual basis: the racial economic gap remains strikingly large, with the median wealth of white households almost ten times that of black households. See Tracy Jan, 'White Families Have Nearly 10 Times the Net Worth of Black Families. And the Gap Is Growing.', *Washington Post*, 28 September 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2017/09/28/black-and-hispanic-families-are-making-more-money-but-they-still-lag-far-behind-whites/.

[53] The use of the highly offensive racial slur 'Nigger', even in writing, remains controversial, and there is no consensus among academics or journalists as to how, when, or by whom this word should be used. I use this word only when necessary in referential contexts; otherwise 'the N-word' is used as a substitute. For discussion on the issue, see Randall L. Kennedy, 'Who Can Say "Nigger"?...And Other Considerations.', *Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, no. 26 (2000): 86–96; Emily Bernard, 'Teaching the N-Word', *The American Scholar*, 1 September 2005, https://theamericanscholar.org/teaching-the-n-word/#.W1MOgNhKjdc; Tola Onanuga, 'The N-Word: Do We Have to Spell It out?', *The Guardian*, 8 May 2014, http://www.theguardian.com/media/mind-your-language/2014/may/08/mind-your-language-n-word; Courtland Milloy, 'We Can't Say the N-Word, but How Should We Write It?', *The Washington Post Metro*, 23 August 2010, http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/08/22/AR2010082202687.html.

And please don't take this as me just disparaging black people
It ain't about that
It's about me being happy that I'm white, know what I'm saying?
But on that note, could someone explain to me why Fat Joe, and any other person of Hispanic descent, is allowed to say the N-word?
I mean I guess it's unrelated but like that shit don't make any sense
I've been thinking about that shit a lot
Because like if I could say the N-word, it would really help my rhyme scheme out
It's like the perfect filler word

These concluding lyrics colour the former part of the song with a different meaning than if they had not been included. The earlier lyrics, which establish Lil Dicky's awareness of his white privilege, can be interpreted as pre-emptive atonement for his later plea to use the 'N-word'.[54] Lil Dicky pays his dues to black culture by acknowledging his privileged racial position, only to turn around and say, 'look, I've proved that I'm a good person, so please could you throw me a bone and let me have what seems to be the only thing in life that is unavailable to me, which is the right to say this word like the rest of you guys?'

In his 2018 song 'Freaky Friday', Lil Dicky found a way in which he could indeed 'have it all': enjoy the benefits of white privilege, while also being able to use the highly offensive racial slur. The 'Freaky Friday' video shows Lil Dicky—in an act of supernatural hocus pocus which parodies the film of the same name—swap bodies with the black hip hop artist Chris Brown. Lil Dicky is able to experience the apparent benefits of blackness, which are limited to an increased aura of street credibility and social standing within the hip hop community: 'I'm so fly and I can dance/There's tattoos on my neck/I just FaceTimed Kanye'. Brown, meanwhile, enjoys blending in as a relatively unknown white man: 'Ain't nobody judging 'cause I'm black/or my controversial past' (the latter line is a clear reference to Brown's physical abuse of his ex-girlfriend Rihanna, here glossed over as 'controversial'). Trapped in Brown's body, Lil Dicky is especially excited at the prospect of being able to say the 'N-word': 'Wonder if I can say the N-word (wait for real?)/Wait, can I really say the N-word?' These lines are followed by an extended sequence in which Brown (as Lil Dicky) delightedly greets everyone he comes across (regardless of race) with this word, a smile of glee etched upon his face:

What up, my nigga? What up, my nigga?
Big ups, my nigga, we up, my nigga
You pussy ass nigga, man, fuck y'all niggas

[54] Although his request to say this word might be read as tongue-in-cheek, this fact does not necessarily alleviate the troubling racial dynamics in which the request is rooted.

'Cause I'm that nigga, nigga, nigga, nigga,
I'm that nigga

In 'Freaky Friday' Lil Dicky has slyly engineered a scenario in which he is permitted the use of this word—which is virtually taboo in all contexts except black English—without being accused of racism: that is, by placing himself in a black man's body. Burd's real voice never actually proclaims the word, which is heard only in Brown's voice, but within the body-swapping scenario the audience imagines the speaker as Lil Dicky. In the construction of this loophole for saying the 'N-word' in 'Freaky Friday', Lil Dicky shows no consideration for the sensitive and complex reasons as to why this word should not be used by white people, nor the implications of him doing so via Brown in 'Freaky Friday'.[55] We should consider the consequences of the word's inclusion for audiences. Shortly after the song's release, the women's lacrosse team at Virginia Tech university faced criticism when a video emerged showing the team (who appear to be white) singing along to 'Freaky Friday', including freely repeating the word 'Nigga' as it is heard in the song.[56] This incident illustrates the danger of Lil Dicky's ploy to use the word in a song which gained significant popularity with a largely white audience—'Freaky Friday' placed at number 9 on the Billboard chart, and at the time of writing has garnered almost 300 million YouTube views—whose singing along to the song can easily be received as a racist gesture. While it is possible to debate the question of whether Lil Dicky should be held responsible for fans' responses to his songs, it is nevertheless easy to understand how his music can be perceived as perpetuating racism.

Lil Dicky's music compels us to consider: should an awareness of one's white privilege be enough to grant one access to all aspects of black culture? One of the consequences of racial privilege is that white people become so accustomed to cultural ownership that they find it difficult to comprehend when something is off limits to them. Lil Dicky's hyper-awareness of his own racial identity does not prevent him from perpetuating this problem of white privilege. The rapper is only superficially self-reflexive: his lyrics indicate a certain understanding of racial politics, yet not enough to prevent him from re-inscribing the very problems he purports to critique.

[55] While the use of this word within black communities (in rap lyrics, for example) can constitute an affirmative act, signalling black folk's reclaiming and transformation of the word's derogatory origins, when spoken by a white person it is still loaded with connotations of the fundamentally unequal relationship between black slave and white master from the era of slavery. The word's use by white people serves to reinforce the structural racism that still exists in society. On the complex history of the word and its ownership, see Kehinde Andrews, 'From the "Bad Nigger" to the "Good Nigga": An Unintended Legacy of the Black Power Movement', *Race & Class* 55, no. 3 (2014): 22–37; Kennedy, 'Who Can Say "Nigger"?'

[56] Nina Godlewski, 'Video: Virginia Tech Women's Lacrosse Team Repeatedly Sings N-Word', *Newsweek*, 28 March 2018, https://www.newsweek.com/virginia-tech-womens-lacrosse-sing-nword-diversity-john-sung-coach-863811.

### 3.3.2 Cultural Appropriation and Capitalism

Since (and also including) Eminem, there has been a pattern of white American rappers who pay lip service to the problems of white privilege and cultural appropriation by acknowledging them in a song or two, while continuing to produce hip hop, often selling more records and winning more awards than their black counterparts.[57] 'White Privilege II', released by the white hip hop duo Macklemore and Ryan Lewis in 2016, explicitly confronts racial inequality and cultural appropriation: 'We want to dress like, walk like, talk like, dance like, yet we just stand by/We take all we want from black culture, but will we show up for black lives?'[58] The song names and shames other white artists working in African American-derived genres—including Elvis, Miley Cyrus, and Iggy Azalea—for profiting from black culture seemingly without concern. Macklemore here takes on the role of informant, implicating other white artists as if to compensate for his own participation in black music. His song was critiqued as an example of 'white saviour syndrome', with critics observing the irony that a white rapper addressing this issue should gain more attention and praise than the numerous black artists who have released songs with similar messages (On the day of its release 'White Privilege II' topped the 'Billboard + Twitter Trending 140' chart, which measures the online conversation surrounding a song.).[59] J. Cole's 'Fire Squad' (2014) includes a similar verse about cultural appropriation in music, implicating Eminem, Justin Timberlake, and Macklemore:

> History repeats itself and that's just how it goes
> Same way that these rappers always bite each other's flows
> Same thing that my nigga Elvis did with Rock 'n' Roll
> Justin Timberlake, Eminem, and then Macklemore
> While silly niggas argue over who gone snatch the crown
> Look around my nigga white people have snatched the sound
> This year I'll prolly go to the awards dappered down
> Watch Iggy win a Grammy as I try to crack a smile

[57] Music award ceremonies have long been criticised for their bias towards white artists. See Michael Hann, 'From Aretha to Beyoncé: The Black Artists Snubbed by the Grammys', *The Guardian*, 16 February 2017, http://www.theguardian.com/music/2017/feb/16/from-aretha-to-beyonce-the-black-artists-snubbed-by-the-grammys.

[58] Following the 2014 Grammy awards Macklemore apologised to the black artist Kendrik Lamar for beating him to two awards, for Best New Artist and Best Rap Album. Macklemore's guilt might have been a factor contributing to his production of 'White Privilege II'. See Melissa Locker, 'Grammys 2014: Macklemore Says Kendrick Lamar "Was Robbed" On Best Rap Album', *Time*, 27 January 2014, http://time.com/2103/grammys-2014-macklemore-says-kendrick-lamar-was-robbed-on-best-rap-album/.

[59] kris ex, 'Macklemore's "White Privilege II" Is a Mess, But We Should Talk About It', *Pitchfork*, 22 January 2016, https://pitchfork.com/thepitch/1003-macklemores-white-privilege-ii-is-a-mess-but-we-should-talk-about-it/.

> I'm just playin', but all good jokes contain true shit
> Same rope you climb up on, they'll hang you with[60]

The rhetorical gesture of self-reflexivity, as demonstrated by Macklemore's 'White Privilege II', allows white artists to participate—and in many cases, earn considerable success—in hip hop, while alleviating their guilty conscience for doing so. Several African-American hip hop artists and critics have expressed concern that hip hop will eventually be completely taken over by white artists. In the wake of Vanilla Ice's commercial success in 1991, the journalist Havelock Nelson observed, 'I don't know if rap in the year 2050 will be seen as white. But it damn sure could be', and in 2014 J. Cole commented, 'I fast forward 20, 30 years from now, and I see hip-hop being completely white'.[61]

The importance attached to the idea of demonstrating self-reflexivity about one's own privilege fuels the misguided notion that one's attitude takes precedence over ones actions, and detracts from the fact that cultural appropriation is fundamentally an economic issue. Cultural appropriation is defined by white people profiting from black culture. In a somewhat simplistic explanation, we can note that in hip hop, relatively harmless cultural exchange (in nerdcore, for example) becomes appropriation when white artists earn not only more money, but also more renown and credit—by winning music awards, for example—than their black peers. The line between respectful homage to black culture and cultural appropriation is exemplified by contrasting nerdcore with mainstream white rappers. Sewell observes of nerdcore:

> This admiration for hip-hop and a desire to produce a nerd version echoes the attitude Amiri Baraka perceived in early white jazz artists such as Bix Beiderbecke and the New Orleans Rhythm Kings. Baraka wrote, 'They had caught the accent, understood the more generalized emotional statements, and, genuinely moved, set out to involve themselves in this music as completely as possible'. Many nerdcore artists reflect their love for hip-hop without necessarily copying what they have heard. As MC Frontalot has said, 'We love rap music. We wish we could be like real rappers, but we're stuck with who we are. And we do what we do for that reason'.[62]

Nerdcore rappers do not attempt to be like 'real' rappers, for the implicit reason that they are not of the appropriate race or socio-economic background to do so. Instead,

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[60] Frodo Baggins, *J. Cole - Fire Squad [LYRICS ON SCREEN]*, accessed 21 July 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W6sRiOID9eY.
[61] Quoted in Hess, 384; Adam Fleischer, 'J. Cole Explains What Inspired His "Fire Squad" Verse About Eminem, Iggy Azalea And Macklemore', *MTV News*, 12 December 2014, http://www.mtv.com/news/2024455/j-cole-explains-fire-squad-eminem-iggy-azalea-lyric/.
[62] Sewell, 'Nerdcore Hip-Hop', 229.

nerdcore artists remain on the fringes of the hip hop music industry; compared with Macklemore, Eminem, The Lonely Island and Lil Dicky, YouTube videos by nerdcore artists have only a handful of views.[63] Nerdcore is a niche genre, mostly consumed by fellow nerds. The artists appear content to be confined in their minor sub-genre, making little money from their music, which is released through independent labels. A fear that nerdcore will take over the genre of rap thus (at the time of writing, at least) seems rather misplaced. Lil Dicky, in contrast, has clear aspirations for hip hop stardom. His collaborations with well-known acts such as Chris Brown and Snoop Dogg indicate a wish to elevate himself to their level of fame. In 'Professional Rapper' Lil Dicky declares:

> I just want to be one of the greats
> Where they gotta bring your boy up every debate
> I don't wanna leave the game the same
>
> [ … ]
>
> I wanna be the best
> I just wanna do it my way
> And turn the whole game sideways

These lyrics suggest that Lil Dicky has aspirations to conquer hip hop; he wants to rise to the top of the genre and even transform it according to his image.

The question of mainstream versus periphery is thus a crucial factor in debates regarding cultural appropriation. For a white artist to participate in a traditionally black genre is not necessarily a problem; it becomes so only when mainstream success is achieved. As long as nerdcore artists remain on the fringes of hip hop, it seems that they will be praised for what they do. If they ever crossed into the mainstream, however, they would likely be accused of cultural appropriation. As Carvell Wallace succinctly observes in his critique of Meghan Trainor's 'NO', in which the white singer adopts a 'blaccent' which imitates the sound traditionally associated with black singers:

> Imitating black language for the sole purposes of making money is an act of erasure. This might not be true in every single case, but it's certainly true in the context in which artists like Trainor operate: an industry where countless black artists throughout the 20th century have had their intellectual property stolen and used to make others rich. The problem isn't the enjoyment or even use of ideas outside of your natural milieu; the fact that people learn and grow from one another and enjoy each other's cultures is, to state

[63] MC Frontalot, who is one of the most well-known nerdcore artists, has just over half a million YouTube views for his video 'Nerdlife', and his channel has 22,000 subscribers.

> it plainly, beautiful. But black people have reason to fear that this will turn out to be an uneven trade. Some people will benefit from that exchange more than others. 'NO' continues an industry tradition, going at least as far back as Janis Joplin, of white women borrowing the attitudes and style of black women as a tool for their own empowerment.[64]

The threat of cultural appropriation will always loom so long as white artists continue to be more marketable than their black peers. Black music has a long history of being whitewashed in order to be sold to a white audience.[65] Hess notes that in his lyrics Eminem 'addresses the marketability of his whiteness as a privilege he would not enjoy if he were black'.[66] Eminem is one of the most successful rappers of all time: he is the best-selling American artist (of any genre) in the 2000s, and has been called the 'King of Hip Hop'.[67] At the time of writing, the best-selling hit by a female rapper is 'Fancy', by the white artist Iggy Azalea. These sales figures show how easily white artists can come to dominate black genres; as Hess asks, 'if whiteness produces sales, how does hip-hop remain an African-American form?'[68] Parodic white rappers have also enjoyed considerable success. Discussing the popularity of 'Lazy Sunday' and 'My Name Is', Leberg notes that 'the immediate popularity of "Lazy Sunday" on the then-nascent YouTube.com lead directly to YouTube's multi-billion dollar purchase by Google. Both pop-culture-saturated videos were able to attract large and diverse audiences, thereby proving the potential popularity and multi-racial resonance of the white rapper'.[69] Lil Dicky's 'Freaky Friday' held the top chart position in the United Kingdom and New Zealand and reached number 8 on the USA's *Billboard* Hot 100, while Lajoie's 'Everyday Normal Guy' has around 37 million YouTube views. Although many black artists—especially in the last few decades—have achieved mainstream commercial popularity (as I have already noted), their achievements still often do not receive the same recognition as that enjoyed by white artists, as demonstrated by the frequent

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[64] Carvell Wallace, 'Stolen Language: The Strange Case Of Meghan Trainor's Blaccent', *MTV News*, 10 June 2016, http://www.mtv.com/news/2891156/stolen-language-the-strange-case-of-meghan-trainors-blaccent/.

[65] Mark Anthony Neal notes that 'according to Taylor, it is usually when a "white person finds his or her way into the practice, becomes proficient, and is 'discovered' by the white community" that the forms of black music reach widespread commercial acceptance. While there are examples of black pop music that counter this claim—the Motown catalogue of the 1960s and Michael Jackson's output in the 1980s immediately come to mind (though we can have a separate discussion as to why they succeeded to the extent that they did)—there is a clear legacy of artists like Presley, Eric Clapton, Pat Boone, and most recently Eminem that have had huge commercial success essentially because they were white artists performing so-called black music'. Mark Anthony Neal, 'White Chocolate Soul: Teena Marie and Lewis Taylor', *Popular Music* 24, no. 3 (October 2005): 370.

[66] Hess, 'Hip-Hop Realness and the White Performer', 381.

[67] Chris Molanphy, 'Introducing the King of Hip-Hop', *Rolling Stone*, 15 August 2011, https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/introducing-the-king-of-hip-hop-101033/.

[68] Hess, 'Hip-Hop Realness and the White Performer', 384.

[69] Leberg, 'Self-Reflexive Whiteness'.

overlooking of black artists at music award ceremonies such as the Grammys and the Video Music Awards.[70] Here, whitewashing equates to mainstreaming. Whiteness still functions as the invisible norm in American culture, and white music is associated with mainstream dominance, while black genres such as hip hop are traditionally more peripheral. Despite their considerable cultural and commercial importance, black genres and artists continue to be relegated to the fringe 'urban' categories at the Grammys.

Cultural appropriation, then, is a consequence of the intersection between capitalism and racism. The paradox which ensues when white artists critique cultural appropriation is paralleled with that which exists when artists attempt to critique the politico-economic climate by selling a pop song, as is the case with Gaye's 'What's Going On'. When a white rapper releases a song which addresses racial difference and white privilege—either in a comedic (The Conchords, Jon Lajoie, The Lonely Island, Lil Dicky) or sincere (Eminem, Macklemore) manner—we can assume that they want their message to be heard by as many people as possible. Yet once this aim is achieved—if the song sells well, or attracts many YouTube views, or wins awards—then the song becomes a symptom of the very system it purports to critique. Mere awareness of the problem of cultural appropriation is insufficient to effect material change. In fact, when white artists and audiences demonstrate a self-reflexive awareness of cultural appropriation by producing and consuming songs that address the issue, their actions only serve to exacerbate the problem in material terms. When white rappers who construct a self-deprecating persona to emphasise their underdog status achieve mainstream commercial and critical success, they can no longer be defined as underdogs. This process does not however apply to black rappers, whose racial identity ensures that—so long as racism persists in society—they can never fully relinquish their underdog status.[71]

The elimination of white artists from the hip hop industry would not solve the fundamental problems of racism and capitalism. Nevertheless, the success of white rappers serves as an upsetting reminder of the deep-rooted historical problem of racism and capitalism working together to perpetuate inequality.[72] This is rendered most acute

[70] See Shaun Cullen, 'The Innocent and the Runaway: Kanye West, Taylor Swift, and the Cultural Politics of Racial Melodrama', *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 28, no. 1 (3 March 2016): 33–50; Hann, 'From Aretha to Beyoncé'.
[71] The richest and most successful black rap artists still face discrimination on account of their skin colour. Cullen describes the racist abuse experienced by Kanye West, for example. Cullen, 'The Innocent and the Runaway', passim.
[72] This is evidenced by the strong and sometimes emotional negative reactions of many black artists to the success of white hip hop artists. Recent examples of this include the longstanding feud between Azealia Banks and Iggy Azalea; Kanye West's storming of the stage at the 2009 MTV Video Music Awards to interrupt Taylor Swift's acceptance speech for winner of Best Female Video, with West arguing the award should have gone to Beyoncé; and the controversy surrounding Nicki Minaj's Twitter dispute with Taylor Swift regarding nominations for the 2015 Video Music Awards. See Cullen, 'The Innocent and the Runaway'.

when white rappers gain success and praise for speaking up about white privilege; it is apparent in the responses by non-white rappers to Macklemore's 'White Privilege II'. One such response is 'White Privilege III' by the Native American rapper, author, and attorney Gyasi Ross, who critiques Macklemore's 'white saviour' complex:

> If you really want to help pass the mic, please
> Give up your platform, let us speak
> Like Marlon Brando and Sacheen
> Don't speak for me or my community
> White folks have spoken for us for centuries
>
> [ … ]
>
> Speak for the brown folks and possibly
> More people will listen 'cause they probably
> Like the white dude better, honestly
> Replicating white privilege and honestly
> Think they're trying to help, but honestly
> You're not, homie
> Pass the mic
> We don't need a saviour
> We can speak for ourselves
> Pass the mic

The economic element of cultural appropriation renders class an important factor when deciding who can take from black culture. I have already observed how Eminem emphasised his 'white trash' upbringing in order to distance himself from the trend of rich white people seeking to profit from black music. His background of economic hardship served as a crucial authenticating strategy in a genre which is grounded in the socio-economic struggle of an American underclass. Vanilla Ice, in contrast, attempted to disguise his middle-class background because he recognised that it would seem inauthentic in the context of hip hop. The Conchords highlight Bret and Jemaine's economic struggle as part of their underdog identity, although their status as people who are broke due to their choice of career (as musicians) must be distinguished from the hardship faced by those brought up in an impoverished household. Lil Dicky, meanwhile, has roots in upper-middle-class suburbia. Lacking the class solidarity that Eminem exploited in order to connect with fellow black rappers, Lil Dicky's threat to black culture is more objectionable: a white man who seems to have everything *still* wants to take something from black people. His economically privileged upbringing has not, however, prevented Lil Dicky from emphasising his apparent social struggle. In one interview he laments un-ironically that 'it's hard being a suburban rapper', explaining that his socio-economic background meant that his parents would have resisted the idea

of him choosing a career in rap over a good education and well-paid job.[73] Lil Dicky thus contorts his university education and subsequent job at an advertising company into disadvantages which hindered his goal of becoming a rapper, presenting himself as an underdog in the context of a hip hop culture in which higher education and white-collar jobs rarely feature in the typical life of a rapper. Lil Dicky's interviewer encourages this portrait, sincerely observing, 'that's why I love about your music, man, is that you paint the perfect picture of what it's like to struggle as a white heterosexual middle-class male, and hip hop needs that', to which Lil Dicky replies, 'I agree, yeah. There's a big voice out there that's just not represented in hip hop'.[74] This remarkably tone-deaf exchange, which appears to be conducted with no hint of irony, wilfully overlooks hip hop's birth as an expressive medium specifically for economically deprived black communities in a society which in almost every sphere is dominated by the voices of middle- and upper-class white men.[75] The interviewer appropriates the term 'struggle' in an apparent attempt to grant Lil Dicky validation in a genre in which the authentic personal struggle of the artist is crucial for their participation. In his song 'How Can I Become a Bawlaa' (2013), Lil Dicky complains 'I just wish I could say black things [ … ] Other people get to rap about like home cooked crack and like jail and shit'.[76] To bemoan, even in a tongue-in-cheek fashion, how his lack of jail time damages his credentials as a rapper is an example of how Lil Dicky fetishises the situation of an socio-economically disadvantaged black man, which Lil Dicky seems to regard with envy, even as he acknowledges his own racial and economic privilege.

### 3.3.3 Lil Dicky: Self-reflexivity or Self-obsession?

While on the surface there might appear to be little difference between Lil Dicky and other comedic white rappers such as The Conchords, The Lonely Island, and Jon Lajoie, Lil Dicky's aspirations in rap and sincere references to his own personal 'struggle' separate him from the other white rappers analysed in this chapter. This comparison demonstrates the fragility of the line between the supposed ironic assertion of one's own whiteness on the one hand, and the emphasis on whiteness as part of the construction of a genuine self-pitying persona who feels like he is owed something by society on the

[73] AXS TV, *Lil Dicky Interview on AXS Live*, accessed 13 June 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oXJKYbvMgdg. Again, in 'Professional Rapper' Lil Dicky emphasises the 'struggle' of choosing to pursue rap over a comfortable middle-class existence.
[74] AXS TV.
[75] Paul J. Olson and Bennie Shobe Jr. note that 'rap is a form of resistance against the racial and economic pressures placed on the truly disadvantaged. It is a medium for challenging authority figures, especially the police. Rap music is a form of political expression and a form of "'oppositional culture'" for a group that the American political system, media, and white majority abandoned long ago'. Paul J. Olson and Bennie Shobe, 'White Rappers and Black Epistemology', *The Journal of Popular Culture* 41, no. 6 (2008): 994–95.
[76] LD Lyrics, *Lil Dicky - How Can I Become a Bawlaa LYRIC VIDEO*.

other. Lil Dicky's attitude towards race erases the distinction between a self-reflexive acknowledgement of one's white privilege and a defensive yet self-indulgent celebration of one's whiteness. Although his songs sometimes appear to be clothed in irony, his interviews indicate that he holds a serious concern for the 'struggle' of middle-class white men.[77] After the election of Trump it is difficult to view the celebration of whiteness—in a rapper who declares to be 'happy that I'm white'—independently from the shadow of white supremacy. Lil Dicky's arrogant preoccupation with his own identity, which clearly surfaces in interviews, transforms what might be seen as admirable self-reflexivity into what is more accurately described as self-obsession.[78] Effective societal change necessitates a self-reflexive turning inwards but also a turning outwards in order to critically consider one's own identity and actions within the context of wider society. Lil Dicky is perpetually stuck in the former phase; he demonstrates that self-awareness without social contextualisation constitutes useless self-obsession.

Self-reflexivity alone is not guaranteed to lead to progressive politics. What matters in the political sphere is what one chooses to do once one has attained a sufficient level of self-awareness. Žižek's position, explained in the Introduction to this thesis, is that ironic distance has little relevance to socio-political critique; the manner in which we do something (whether self-reflexive or not) matters less than the fact that we are doing it. Lil Dicky performs hip hop with an attitude of self-awareness—but he is still performing hip hop. The self-reflexivity of parodic white rappers analysed in this chapter can thus be interpreted two ways: either as showing that, as white men, they are sympathetic to anti-racist (and feminist) politics; or as indicating a regressive backlash against these progressive movements. If we imagine a scale with these two respective positions constituting poles at either end, Lil Dicky would place at the regressive pole, with The Conchords at the opposite end, and Jon Lajoie somewhere in between.

## 3.4 Conclusion

On one hand, The Conchords' meta-parody of cultural appropriation in 'Hip v Rhyme' can be interpreted as a critique of the redundancy of seemingly endless and stagnant cycles of self-reflexivity. From this perspective, they align with Žižek's position. If The

[77] See, for example, Drew Millard, 'Lil Dicky Isn't a White Supremacist, He's Just an Asshole', *Noisey*, 17 October 2014, https://noisey.vice.com/en_au/article/rdaxm6/lil-dicky-isnt-a-white-supremacist-hes-just-an-asshole.

[78] Lil Dicky's mixture of arrogance and self-obsession is apparent in his response to Millard's interview question, 'Tell me about your background': 'I grew up right outside Philly. I've always been very funny—that's been the main theme of my life. People who know me very well would label me the funniest person they know. There's nothing better than making people laugh and I feel I deserve respect and recognition. Apart from being funny, I'm smart and well-qualified for jobs that have nothing to do with my sense of humor'. Millard.

Conchords poke fun at someone poking fun at something—that is, parodying Eminem's use of parody as a critique of his own whiteness in 'My Name Is'—they are seen to question the meaning and effectiveness of the process of parody itself. Like Žižek's critique of cynical distance, The Conchords ask whether making fun of something is always necessarily productive: what is the use in constant self-reflexivity if it does little to materially change the world in which we live?

The example of Lil Dicky demonstrates how easily the white underdog persona can become an excuse for cultural appropriation. The Conchords are distinguished from Lil Dicky in that their satirical intent is clear; they obviously do not consider white folk to be underdogs. Nevertheless, there are other potential problems with The Conchords' handling of race. We can argue that they benefit from the existence of racism and cultural appropriation, using these phenomena as comedic fodder in their television show and songs. In the same vein as the critique of satire's 'liberating laughter' discussed in the Introduction, Leberg observes how comedy can function to artificially smooth over the cracks—including racism and poverty—in society, by providing a comforting balm of laughter for the audience:

> The tensions over authenticity and appropriation that are embedded in the sincere white rapper's performance not only transfer to the parodic white rapper but are compounded by the lyrical preoccupation with comedy, which can inadvertently ameliorate, if not validate, the ever-present racial tensions.[79]

We can suggest that The Conchords transform palpable racial tensions into comfortable and enjoyable comedy. Another potential problem in The Conchords' (and other comedic white rappers') hip hop parody is that even as the position of white rappers—and wider racial dynamics in society—are critiqued, such ideology is in fact re-inscribed by the simple fact that the parodic white rappers are still white men doing rap. The case studies discussed in this chapter thus illustrate Hutcheon's warning about parody's potentially conservative act of repetition.

The uncomfortable racial dynamics are further compounded by the fact that The Conchords (along with many of the other rappers addressed in this chapter) are white men who not only educate the audience about the issue of cultural appropriation, but also indicate that they possess a higher level of self-awareness than some of the black artists they imitate. Compared with Gaye, The Conchords show themselves to have the knowing upper hand on a number of socio-economic matters, including the power of the protest song and the prospects of black capitalism. This upper hand is also displayed

[79] Leberg, 'Self-Reflexive Whiteness', 4.

with regards to The Conchords' competence as musicians; McKenzie and Clement prove that they can master several black musical forms, including Motown and hip hop.

The relative privilege enjoyed by Clement and McKenzie as real-life people must also be noted. Even though their Conchords characters are positioned as Other in relation to the insider status of the people of colour, this does not alter the fact that as white men they hold a privileged position in society, while the Indian-American actors in the show (Aziz Ansari and Arj Barker) are much more likely to experience racism in real life.[80] Regardless of the fictional racial dynamics portrayed within the show, in *Flight of the Conchords* the main characters are white, while Indian-American actors feature in supporting roles. The lack of black characters in the show is notable; black people are visibly (though not musically) erased from The Conchords' landscape. The Conchords, it can be argued, join the crowd of other white rappers in exacerbating the problem of cultural appropriation by parodying black music. Although the group began as a fringe comedy act, their popularity has grown to the extent that they now embark on sell-out world tours. Their economic success holds significance in debates concerning cultural appropriation and exploitation of black music. The Conchords exploit the fact of racial discrimination as material for their comedy, and forge a successful career (in part) from this, without having to experience the negative consequences of such discrimination in their daily lives.

Chapters 2 and 3 have highlighted the inseparability of capitalism and race, through explorations of Motown music, black capitalism, white privilege, and cultural appropriation in parody songs by The Conchords and other white rappers. The question of mainstream versus periphery has also been shown to be a key factor in debates surrounding cultural appropriation in music. The discussion of racial politics in the present chapter serves to complicate the conclusion of the previous chapter, which posited that The Conchords' demonstration of multiple layers of self-reflexivity constituted an example of parody's productive critique. Parody's essential structure means that it is always inevitably self-reflexive, to a greater or lesser degree. Because of this, it might seem as though parody could constitute a legitimate vehicle for white artists to produce hip hop music. Several white parody artists have attempted to do this, either through an exaggerated parody of whiteness (Eminem, Weird Al, The Lonely Island, Jon Lajoie)—thus making fun of white men doing rap through rap—or by presenting a parody of white rappers (The Conchords). In 'Hip v Rhyme' and throughout The Conchords' television show, self-reflexivity is used as a shield to deflect

[80] Ansari has explored racial politics in everyday life in his sitcom *Master of None* (2015-). One episode specifically addresses the discrimination faced by Indian-American actors, such as being stereotyped and typecast due to skin colour. 'Indians on TV', *Master of None* (Netflix, 6 November 2015), https://www.netflix.com/watch/80065730?trackId=13752289&tctx=0%2C3%2C3c52b1fd-7b01-4dbe-be15-13ff4febac04-39443985%2C%2C.

allegations of cultural appropriation. The discussion of 'Hip v Rhyme' in the context of other parodic and sincere white rappers, however, indicates that such seemingly endless cycles of self-reflexivity are not enough to combat the problem of cultural appropriation.

This chapter has shown that self-reflexivity alone is an inadequate defence against the economic structure of cultural appropriation. Furthermore, the example of Lil Dicky shows that what looks like self-reflexivity on the outset can actually be hollow self-obsession, and that this attitude can still be racist. The limitations of parody songs' potential for political resistance have thus been revealed, especially when such songs are authored by those who hold a privileged position in society.

# PART III
# BOY BANDS

# CHAPTER 4

## BOY BAND MUSIC: AN INTRODUCTION

This final part of the thesis examines boy band pop from the perspective of parody songs that make fun of its musical materials. One of the uses of pop parody is to critique the aesthetics and economic structure of a particular genre of music. Of the pop parody songs which critique musical aesthetics (Type B), a significantly large number choose boy band music as their target. The reasons for this are not difficult to fathom. Boy band music is an easy target for those who want to criticise mainstream or manufactured pop. As the present chapter will demonstrate, boy band music is (for better or worse) often regarded as espousing the most pernicious aspects of so-called 'manufactured' pop, symbolising contrivance, artifice, and banality in all stages of the musical production line. Boy band music can thus be considered low-hanging fruit in the parody artist's quest to destroy the credibility of mainstream pop.

The motive of the parody artist notwithstanding, boy band parodies are useful to us as scholars. As the present chapter demonstrates, academic scholarship and music criticism have thus far mostly neglected the aesthetics of boy band music. This means that the critique of such musical aesthetics presented by the parodies analysed in Chapter 5 helps to fill a lacuna in boy band music criticism. Of course, these parody songs present a particularly biased critique of the musical format. Parody songs cannot be read as substitutes for pop music scholarship or criticism. The parody artists approach boy band pop with a clear agenda, which is often to disparage this music. But the parody songs constitute useful objects of study in themselves, since they give a valuable insight into the reception of boy band pop. These songs also provide us with an opportunity to assess the format of boy band pop as a whole, providing a route to approach the study of music which has hitherto been largely ignored. The present chapter thus takes a step back from parodies to provide an overview of boy band music which is lacking in academic discourse. In order to assess the critical implications of the parodies it is necessary to understand how boy band music functions and what it sounds like. The chapter is divided into three parts. The first part introduces the critical discourse on boy band pop. Next, I define the boy band format, including a discussion of its musical aesthetics. The final part of the chapter then returns to the critical discourse to examine the debate concerning boy band reception, focusing specifically on gender.

## 4.1 Boy Band Music and the Academy

Chapter 1 has already discussed the reluctance of popular music scholars to engage with mainstream and especially so-called 'manufactured' pop. Boy band music is no exception to this trend. Nevertheless, while the discipline has been slow to engage with boy band music, a thin smattering of literature on the subject over the past twenty years indicates that a body of research is beginning to emerge. While much more of this research focuses on sociological and cultural aspects than on musical aesthetics, nevertheless, as Mark Duffett noted in 2012, even from a cultural studies perspective boy bands are often overlooked.[1] Of the research on boy bands that exists, a significant portion focuses on gender and sexuality. The boy band phenomenon brings a new perspective to studies of masculinity in popular music; the boys' non-threatening posture and willing submission to the female gaze goes against the grain of the aggressive and dominating masculinity of much rock music.[2] The emerging field of fandom studies includes several projects on boy band fans, foregrounding an approach to female sexuality that has long been overlooked in many disciplines.[3] That a larger body of research exists on boy band fans than on the music itself suggests that the activities of the former may be more remarkable than the latter. The phenomenon of boy band reunions has also been analysed; in a special issue of *Popular Music History*

[1] Duffet observes that 'popular discussions on the subject have so far been rather limited. With occasional exceptions, academic work addressing the nature of the phenomenon also is rather lacking. Stuart Borthwick and Ron Moy's *Popular Music Genres* (2004) fails, for instance, to mention the likes of the Backstreet Boys or Westlife. Andy Bennett's *Cultures of Popular Music* (2005) only mentions teenybop in passing and does not really engage with boy bands as a phenomenon'. Mark Duffett, 'Multiple Damnations: Deconstructing the Critical Response to Boy Band Phenomena', *Popular Music History* 7, no. 2 (August 2012): 187.

[2] Studies of masculinity in boy bands include Noel McLaughlin and Martin McLoone, 'From Men to Boys: Masculinity, Politics and the Irish Boy Band', in *Masculinity and Irish Popular Culture,* ed. Conn Holohan and Tony Tracy (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 61–74; P. McDonald, 'Feeling and Fun: Romance, Dance and the Performing Male Body in the Take That Videos', in *Sexing the Groove: Popular Music and Gender*, ed. Sheila Whiteley (London; New York: Routledge, 1997), 277–94; Ian Biddle and Freya Jarman-Ivens, 'Introduction: Oh Boy! Making Masculinity in Popular Music', in *Oh Boy!: Masculinities and Popular Music,* ed. Freya Jarman-Ivens (New York; London: Routledge, 2007), 5–6; Gayle Wald, '"I Want It That Way": Teenybopper Music and the Girling of Boy Bands', *Genders Online Journal* 35 (2002), https://www.academia.edu/654238/I_Want_It_That_Way_Teenybopper_Music_and_the_Girling_of_Boy_Bands; Tara Brabazon, *Popular Music: Topics, Trends & Trajectories* (London: SAGE, 2011); Daryl Jamieson, 'Marketing Androgyny: The Evolution of the Backstreet Boys', *Popular Music* 26, no. 2 (2007): 245–58; Sheila Whiteley, *Too Much Too Young: Popular Music, Age and Gender* (London: Routledge, 2005).

[3] Research on boy band fandom includes Sandra R. Garcia, 'Yes, I'll Admit It, I like Boy Bands, so What?', *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 14, no. 2 (1 January 2005): 69–70; Simone Driessen and Bethan Jones, 'Love Me For A Reason: An Auto-Ethnographic Account of Boyzone Fandom', *IASPM Journal* 6, no. 1 (8 November 2016): 68–84; Simone Driessen, 'Larger than Life: Exploring the Transcultural Fan Practices of the Dutch Backstreet Boys Fandom', *Participations Journal of Audience & Reception Studies* 12, no. 2 (November 2015): 180–96; Maggie Andrews and Rosie Whorlow, 'Girl Power and the Post-Modern Fan: The 1996 Boyzone Tour', in *All the World and Her Husband: Women in 20th Century Consumer Culture*, ed. Margaret R. Andrews and Mary M. Talbot (London: Cassell, 2000), 253–66; Daisy Asquith, 'Crazy about One Direction: Whose Shame Is It Anyway?', in *Seeing Fans: Representations of Fandom in Media and Popular Culture*, ed. Lucy Bennett and Paul Booth (New York: Bloomsbury, 2016), 79-88; Bethan Jones, '"I Will Throw You off Your Ship and You Will Drown and Die": Death Threats, Intra-Fandom Hate, and the Performance of Fangirling', in Bennett and Booth, *Seeing Fans*, 53-65; William Proctor, 'A

centred on Take That, a significant proportion of the articles focused on the band's reunion.[4]

Research focusing on the musical materials of boy bands is much harder to come by; no extant literature tackles this subject head-on, though there is some which comes close. As Chapter 1 already noted, there have been studies on the aesthetics of several types of manufactured pop—such as Eurovision songs and power ballads—which have ties to boy band music.[5] Stephen Graham's analysis of Justin Timberlake's song forms includes a brief description of the boy band sound, focusing particularly on the music of NSYNC, of which Timberlake was a member before beginning his career as a solo artist.[6] Although Daryl Jamieson's article on the presentation of queer sexuality in the Backstreet Boys touches on musical aesthetics, it does so only briefly.[7] Rather than engaging in detailed musical analysis, Jamieson merely scratches the surface of several Backstreet Boys songs, showing how some musical features might suggest queer readings. Even this article, which devotes attention to the musical and visual texts of the Backstreet Boys, nevertheless puts a significant amount of focus on the group's marketing strategies, and the various different possible interpretations audiences can take from them. Research such as this thus sends the same message to the reader as the literature on boy band fans: that boy bands are primarily an audience-driven consumer product. The purpose of boy bands has more to do with marketing and audience reception than with the need for artistic expression; the music is incidental to this former function.

Paul Morley's article in The Guardian indicates as much.[8] Declaring that 'boybands have little to do with pop music', Morley suggests that judging boy bands by their musical output is beside the point. It is, he proposes, more logical to evaluate them on the terms by which they were created:

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New Breed of Fan?: Regimes of Truth, One Direction Fans, and Representations of Enfreakment', in Bennett and Booth, *Seeing Fans*, 67-77.

[4] These articles include Anja Löbert, 'Explorative, Authentic and Cohesive: Factors Contributing to Successful Boy Band Reunions', *Popular Music History* 7, no. 2 (August 2012): 127–42; Georgina Gregory, 'You Can Make Me Whole Again: Popular Music Tributes Embodying the Reunion', *Popular Music History* 7, no. 2 (August 2012): 211-24; Tobias Nolte, 'Breakup and Reunion from a Psychoanalytic Perspective: Some Ideas from Applied Kleinian Psychoanalysis', *Popular Music History* 7, no. 2 (August 2012): 199–210; Tim Wise, 'Introduction: Making Things Whole Again—the Take That Reunion', *Popular Music History* 7, no. 2 (August 2012): 117–20. Other sociological literature on boy bands includes T. Brabazon, 'Robbie Williams: A Better Man?', *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 5, no. 1 (2002): 45–66; Moynagh Sullivan, 'Boyz to Men: Irish Boy Bands and Mothering the Nation', in *Irish Postmodernisms and Popular Culture*, ed. Wanda Balzano, Anne Mulhall, and Moynagh Sullivan (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007): 184-96. See also Baker, 'Teenybop and the Extraordinary Particularities of Mainstream Practice'.

[5] See Metzer, *The Ballad in American Popular Music*; Björnberg, 'Sounding the Mainstream'.

[6] Graham, 'Justin Timberlake's Two-Part Complementary Forms'. See also Stan Hawkins, '[Un]*Justified*: Gestures of Straight-Talk in Justin Timberlake's Songs', in *Oh Boy!: Masculinities and Popular Music*, ed. Freya Jarman-Ivens (New York: Routledge, 2013), 197–212.

[7] Jamieson, 'Marketing Androgyny'.

[8] Paul Morley, 'The Boy Bands Are Always Back in Town', *The Guardian*, 26 November 2010, http://www.theguardian.com/music/2010/nov/26/boybands-pop-paul-morley.

> Boybands should be reviewed, rated and reasoned with as a separate branch of entertainment where the merchandising, logo, choreography, physicalattractiveness, marketing, groin area, tattoos, image, haircut, smile and synchronised ability to mime is just as important, if not more so, than the repetitive content and sound of their songs.
>
> [ … ]
>
> Musically, as a rock critic of a certain age with a well established set of intellectual and emotional requirements, I might be inclined to give JLS, say, one star for their music, and grumpily despair at the predictable industrial process behind such songs. It's entirely stupid, though, to rate JLS in such a way. It's like expecting a packet of biscuits to have soul.
>
> Better to comment on how they present themselves day in, day out as a hard-working, disciplined combination of boys next door and stars, virtual toys and pretend best friends, glowing performers and deferential servants. Lacking many of the qualifications required to judge such groups as part of a very specific manufacturing tale, I'm still aware that JLS as an example of a successfully evolving boyband are much more of a four-star proposition [ …] Even Westlife could get a couple of stars under this specialised new criteria.
>
> There needs to be a new section in the magazines and newspapers—and of course in whatever online publications come next, which is another place where the boyband can thrive, as something that is all at once seen, heard, shared and sold—that incorporates this regulated hybrid of showbusiness, product placement, community spirit, coded sexuality, audience manipulation, organised seduction and attenuated song. Boybands need to be observed and analysed for what they are.[9]

Here, Morley repeats the familiar stance on boy bands held by people who consider themselves to know anything about music (and who subscribe to 'rock ideology'): that boy bands are completely lacking in musical value and represent everything that is wrong with the capitalist music industry. In an unprecedented instance of self-aware humility, however, Morley recognises that, 'as a rock critic of a certain age', boy bands are not for him, and that he is thus poorly qualified to judge their effectiveness, suggesting that instead, 'there should be a new sort of cultural expert to comment on their abilities and qualities'. Boy bands, in short, should be analysed on a different plane to other kinds of popular music that are less unapologetically manufactured. Boy band music functions in its own separate socio-economic sphere.

[9] Morley.

The boy band's status as a primarily audience-driven format accounts for its holding more interest for sociologists than for musicologists. That 'boybands have little to do with pop music' seems to be the consensus among music critics, musicologists and sociologists alike: the music is just not worth talking about, functioning as it does as an arbitrary vehicle for the cultural signifier of the boy band. These final two chapters of the thesis, however, challenge this consensus by considering whether there are aspects of the boy band phenomenon that might be of interest to a musicologist. What can a musicologist observe about boy bands that might go overlooked by a critic or a sociologist?

It is not an exaggeration to note that the presence of boy bands (as well as other 'manufactured' pop acts) has provoked a sense of collective anxiety among music critics and scholars alike. Perhaps because this cultural form is aimed at a demographic that is almost diametrically opposed to that of most critics and scholars, it is difficult for this latter group to know how to handle boy bands, which means that they are mostly ignored. (Clear-headed, nuanced accounts like Morley's are exceptions to this rule.) If anything, musicologists are even more flummoxed than critics when it comes to dealing with boy band music. The postmodern pluralism that has led to the virtual exiling of value judgements from music studies means that this music (or indeed any music) is difficult to critique on the grounds of music aesthetics—yet neither do scholars wish to value it, so they simply ignore its existence.[10] The presence of boy band music disrupts two ideas that have become popular in music studies in recent years: first, that it is wrong (or beside the point) to assess music according to its aesthetic value; and second, that all kinds of music are equally embroiled in the capitalist marketplace. Frith comes close to promulgating this idea in his explanation of the three musical 'worlds' which, following Bourdieu, he identifies. The 'bourgeois world' (where classical music dominates), the 'folk music world' and the 'commercial music world' each have their own distinct ideology and set of behaviours, yet each exists within a capitalist marketplace, which means that music holds a commodified status in each world.[11] The differences between the worlds thus function on a surface level of discourse rather than on a deeper economic level. Folk music discourse, for example, presents a carefully constructed veneer of authenticity, whereby there is 'a very conscious destroying and destruction of glamour', and 'that which is commodified is presented as communal'.[12] Both the folk and bourgeois worlds have their own particular means by which the essentially commodified nature of the music

[10] On the exiling of explicit value judgements from music studies, see Frith, *Performing Rites*, 11–12; Janet M. Levy, 'Covert and Casual Values in Recent Writings about Music', *The Journal of Musicology* 5, no. 1 (1987): 3–27.
[11] Frith, *Performing Rites*, 36–42.
[12] Niall MacKinnon, quoted in Frith, 40.

is disguised, and notions of authenticity in each world are constructed in accordance with this. The commercial music world, on the other hand, can in a certain sense be considered more honest (which is a marker of authenticity in itself) than the other worlds because its values are constructed in a way that indicates the music's acceptance of its commodified status: 'its values are created by and organised around the music industry, around the means and possibilities of turning sounds into commodities—musical value and monetary value are therefore equated, and the sales charts become the measure and symbol of "good" pop music'.[13] This suggests that the only difference between the commercial music world on the one hand and the folk and bourgeois worlds on the other is the former's unconcern about hiding its commodified status. With this in mind, boy band music is a nuisance, because it suggests that, first, a consideration of musical aesthetic value might actually be valid; and second, that the nature of music's relationship to capitalism might vary from genre to genre and from artist to artist. On the first point, boy band music does not provoke the same sense of anxiety for scholars working in media and communication as it does for musicologists, because the former are less concerned about ideas of artistic value. The topic of boy bands thus does not constitute so much of a sore spot for media scholars.[14]

The lack of scholarly engagement with boy bands is further explained by the form's relative lateness in the course of popular music history. The 'golden era' of boy bands ran from the late 1990s to the early 2000s, which means that any research on the subject is unlikely to be dated from before the new millennium. Popular music scholars often choose to study the music of their youth: music that they listened to throughout their teens and twenties. It is therefore probable that those who select boy band music as their object of study will come from a generation of scholars who are still relatively young. Indeed, as someone who came of age in the late 90s and 2000s and distinctly remembers boy bands as an important part of my adolescence, I too am guilty of succumbing to this trend of studying my own 'youth music'.

Boy band music's place at the younger end of this broad category of 'youth music' is another factor that has encouraged scholars' dismissal of the phenomenon. Popular music scholars have been reluctant to address music whose primary audience has not yet reached puberty. In his study of children who are fans of S Club 7, John Horton suggests that the release of the group's single 'Reach' was 'illustrative of manifold cultural forms and practices which—being ostensibly banal, fun, faddish, lowbrow and

[13] Frith, 41.
[14] As I noted in Chapter 1, the headache left over from Adorno means that popular music scholars have held a psychological block regarding the kind of music which, it is assumed, most accurately reflects that which Adorno railed against. Perhaps it is only now, when sufficient time has passed since Adorno's death in 1969, and when popular music studies has managed to establish itself as a valid discipline in the academy, that we can properly confront this aspect of Adorno's work. See Paddison, 'The Critique Criticised'.

'childish'—continue to go largely unheralded by many social/cultural geographers.'[15] Although some fans of boy band music are in the stages of adolescence and even older, the music is often regarded to appeal especially to 'tweens'. A 'tweenager' is understood to be a person roughly between the ages of 9 and 12, or between childhood and adolescence.[16] While there exists plenty of scholarly literature on music for young people, it tends to focus on music for those in their mid or late teens, rather than the earlier 'tweenage' market.[17] Recent years, however, have witnessed a small yet emerging body of research on music for children and tweenagers, most of which falls into the category of 'manufactured' pop.[18] Finally, boy band music's primary popularity with girls means that it has been dismissed by the academy. The tendency for both music criticism and popular music scholarship to devalue cultural forms which are perceived as feminine has been addressed in Chapter 1, and a later section of the present chapter will submit the gender politics of boy band reception to further scrutiny.

The absence of research on the aesthetics of boy band music means that the parodies discussed in Chapter 5 might constitute the closest thing we have to a critique of this music. It is for this reason, if for nothing else, that these satirical songs are worth investigating. By taking them seriously, and by taking their object of parody seriously, they compel us to confront the aesthetic characteristics of boy band music in a way that pop music scholars have thus far not considered to be necessary.

## 4.2 The Boy Band: An Overview

### 4.2.1 Defining the Boy Band

How is 'boy band' to be defined for the purposes of this final part of the thesis and the parody songs that are its subject? Scholarly consensus suggests that the economic context and lack of creative agency for the band's members, both of which fuel accusations of 'artificiality', are the criteria that most clearly separate boy bands from other kinds of music groups. Boy bands are created by a manager or record label, and neither write their own music nor play instruments. Brabazon notes that the term 'boy

[15] John Horton, '"The Best Thing Ever": How Children's Popular Culture Matters', *Social & Cultural Geography* 11, no. 4 (1 June 2010): 378.
[16] Tyler Bickford explains that 'the category "tween" emerged in the early 1990s to identify a marketing demographic of young people "between" childhood and adolescence—9–12-year-old kids (narrowly, or broadly 4–15 years old)—who might otherwise be called pre-adolescents'. Tyler Bickford, 'The New "Tween" Music Industry: The Disney Channel, Kidz Bop and an Emerging Childhood Counterpublic', *Popular Music* 31, no. 3 (2012): 418.
[17] It is tempting to assume that the choices of consumption among youth cultures are insignificant, because children and teenagers' tendencies to grow out of particular tastes means that they are less relevant in the long term.

band' 'signified artificiality, a group of young men brought together by a record company or an ambitious manager'.[19] Alex DiBlasi explains that 'boy bands have become solidified as part of the musical lexicon as a fabricated group of young boys, often under the auspices of a manager more interested in profit than music, who sing catchy pop music that has great appeal to young listeners'.[20] I have expanded on these basic definitions to produce a list of criteria that are met by most boy bands:

- The group is comprised of male singers (sometimes 3, but more often 4 or 5) in their teens and early twenties. Sometimes members can be very young; Nick Carter was just 13 when he joined the Backstreet Boys.
- The group is formed by a manager or record label.
- Band members sing and rarely play instruments.
- Songs are not written by the band members. Songwriters produce hits especially for the band, or arrange cover songs.[21]
- The group might experience a huge amount of fame in just a few years, but this fame is often short lived. Usually the band breaks up when the members reach their early or mid twenties and express a desire to pursue solo projects.[22]
- The music resides firmly in the category of pop. Although it is sometimes inflected with other musical styles, such as R&B, it will not be properly situated within this genre; it is more likely to be a hybrid musical style that borrows from one or more identifiable genres.[23]
- The audience is adolescent and pre-adolescent (usually straight) girls and (usually queer-identifying) boys.
- Groups perform synchronised movements, which range from intricately choreographed dancing (NSYNC) to simple actions (Westlife were known for sitting on high stools during live performances, with all the band members rising to stand at a point of particular emotional intensity in the song, which often coincided with an elevating modulation).
- While the band is marketed as a group with a cohesive collective identity, individual members adopt a proscribed distinct persona, each designed to

[18] See Horton, '"The Best Thing Ever"'; Bickford, 'The New "Tween" Music Industry'.
[19] Brabazon, *Popular Music*, 218.
[20] Alex DiBlasi, 'Boy Bands', in *Music in American Life: An Encyclopedia of the Songs, Styles, Stars, and Stories That Shaped Our Culture*, ed. Jacqueline Edmondson, vol. 1, A-C (Santa Barbara, Calif.: Greenwood, 2013), 142.
[21] There are some exceptions to this, such as Gary Barlow in Take That and JC Chasez in NSYNC, both of whom contributed to songwriting.
[22] Brabazon notes that 'boy bands rarely have longevity. As their audience ages, tastes transform. Band members, such as Justin Timberlake, Brian McFadden, Robbie Williams and Ricky Martin, frequently leave for a solo career. When prominent members move on, the boy band may stagger on for a time, but will eventually fade and then fold'. Brabazon, *Popular Music*, 219.

appeal to a different part of the fan base. Roles include the funny one, the sexy one, the bad boy, the shy one, and the cute one.

- Lyrics focus on romantic love and emotional connection rather than sexual desire, rendering the songs appropriate for a young audience.[24]

Scholars and critics differ in their ideas of which group constituted the first boy band. Groups from as diverse periods as the Monkees (who began in 1966), New Edition (1978), New Kids on the Block (1984), Take That (1989), and the Backstreet Boys (1993) have been cited as the first 'true' examples of the boy band format, with the Jackson Five and the Osmond Brothers cited as important precedents.[25] Both the Beatles and the Monkees are sometimes mentioned in relation to the term 'boy band', though neither of them fulfil all the criteria listed above. Both groups, however, anticipated the boy band format in different ways. Young female fans' obsession with the Beatles, termed 'Beatlemania', is comparable to the hype that surrounded Westlife and The Backstreet Boys and, more recently, One Direction—although it is important to note that the Beatles also attracted boys and men (regardless of sexual persuasion) as part of their fan base. The Beatles' distinct personalities were emphasised in a manner similar to the marketed individuation of later boy band members, while their matching outfits and hair styles signified group cohesion.[26] But the Beatles were not a boy band: they wrote their own music and played their own instruments. The Beatles were a rock group whose audience happened to span a wide demographic, including young women and girls. The Monkees (1966-1970) came closer to the widely-understood definition of 'boy band', since they were put together by a producer.[27] As I observed in Chapter 1, by starring in their own television show, the Monkees set a precedent for the multimedia franchises of bubblegum pop groups of the early 2000s such as S Club 7, and they are often cited as one of the most memorable examples of early manufactured pop. Especially on later albums, however, the Monkees played their own instruments, which, like the Beatles, suggests they belong in the category of pop/rock group rather than boy band, since they are shown to be more than a group of young men who can sing and are conventionally good-looking, but can do little else.

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[23] For this reason, Boyz II Men reside on the fringes of the 'boy band' definition: they are sometimes defined as an R&B group, and sometimes as a boy band.
[24] Craig Jennex observes that 'boy bands sang about romantic love and desire with emotionally charged lyrics and musical aesthetics. Despite the frequent use of subtle sexual euphemisms, they typically emphasized emotional connection over physical, making the genre culturally-appropriate for adolescent participation'. Craig Jennex, 'Boy Bands', *Grove Music Online*, 25 July 2013, http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.ezproxy01.rhul.ac.uk/view/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-1002240279.
[25] See Brabazon, *Popular Music*, 218; DiBlasi, 'Boy Bands', 140; Jennex, 'Boy Bands'.
[26] T. Brabazon, 'Robbie Williams: A Better Man?', 46.
[27] The entry for 'Boy Bands' in the encyclopaedia *Music in American Life* cites the Monkees as the first American boy band. DiBlasi, 'Boy Bands', 140.

Further to this, I sympathise with Brabazon's distinction between 'male singing groups' and boy bands: 'male singing groups—to whom "boy bands" as a phrase was not applied—include The Platters, The Temptations and The Bee Gees. This is a significant distinction. Being "boys" is not enough to summon the description. The Jackson Five danced better than Take That. The Platters had tighter harmonies than Boyzone'. For Brabazon, the distinction rests on the level of the group's artificiality: 'a "boy band" implies artificiality and constructedness. Artifice is part of the project'.[28]

While groups from the 1960s are cited as early precedents of the boy band, scholarly consensus suggests that it wasn't until the 1990s that the boy band project properly came into fruition. Craig Jennex's American-dominated account of boy bands in the *Grove Dictionary of Music* observes that 'interested in the potential success of a staunchly pop-oriented version of New Kids on the Block, Lou Pearlman founded the Backstreet Boys in 1993 and *NSYNC in 1995'.[29] The UK singing group Take That, formed in 1989 by Nigel Martin-Smith, are sometimes credited with initiating the 90s boy band trend: Brabazon describes them as 'the archetypal postmodern do-wop group', and she uses the phrase 'Take That Template' to explain how boy bands of the 90s and early 2000s were created and marketed.[30] She observes that 'the TTT (Take That Template) has been followed by Boyzone and Westlife most obviously, but can also be monitored in the marketing of New Kids on the Block, East 17, the Backstreet Boys, Five and N'Sync'.[31] Scholars tend to agree on the significance of the 1990s and 2000s as the period in which boy bands enjoyed their height of popularity. The political and economic shifts which took place in this moment may be significant: the reification of teenage female identity and its transferral to external objects like boy bands (and girl power) coincided with the 'end of history' and victory of capitalism and commodified culture.[32] Jennex confines his strict definition of 'boy band' to the late 90s and early 2000s.[33] The rise of boy bands took place in the context of an explosion of other bubblegum pop acts at the time, including girl groups (such as the Spice Girls, Sugababes and B*witched), mixed-gender groups (Steps, S Club 7 and Vengaboys) and solo artists (Britney Spears). Brabazon observes that 'if the 1990s had a marked generic form, though, then it was the presence of male and female singing groups. The personalities were managed, marketed and performed. The intensification of this principle was obviously the Spice Girls, where the name of the group infiltrated the personality of the singers: Ginger Spice, Posh Spice, Baby Spice, Scary Spice and Sporty

[28] Brabazon, *Popular Music*, 218.
[29] Jennex, 'Boy Bands'.
[30] Brabazon, 'Robbie Williams', 47.
[31] Brabazon, 48.
[32] See Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (London: Penguin, 1992).
[33] Jennex, 'Boy Bands'.

Spice'.[34] My definition of boy band is confined to the 1990s/2000s model, which is the target for the parody songs analysed in Chapter 5.

#### 4.2.2 Aesthetics of Boy Band Pop

What, then, can we say about the aesthetic characteristics of boy band music? Several empirical studies of mainstream pop use data from a large number of songs to form evidence-based conclusions on the general characteristics of this music. Joe Bennett's analysis of common song characteristics, Walter Everett's study of tonal systems, and the songwriting website Hooktheory collate data from hit songs from the 1950s to the 2000s or 2010s.[35] The latter two studies concentrate on tonal analysis, while Bennett investigates other musical parameters. It should be noted that none of the studies distinguish between different kinds of chart music, including mainstream hits alongside alternative songs and artists that achieved commercial popularity. Boy band pop is included within this broad database. In terms of distinguishing features that set boy band music apart from other types of chart hits, then, such data is of little use; however, it is useful to build an understanding of the general characteristics of mainstream pop, upon which specific features of boy band music can be added.

Hooktheory analysed 1300 pop songs from the Billboard 100, and found the following trends:[36]

- C major and its relative minor A are the most common keys by far: 26% of the songs are in one of these keys. The next most popular key is G major (and relative minor E), at 12%.
- The most common chords are I, IV, and V, followed by vi and ii.
- Although perfect cadences are common, plagal cadences are more frequent.[37]
- I-V-vi-IV is the most common progression.[38] After vi there is a significant drop in the use of other chords, so these four chords are the most common by far.

[34] Brabazon, 'Robbie Williams', 46–47.
[35] Joe Bennett, 'Collaborative Songwriting—The Ontology Of Negotiated Creativity In Popular Music Studio Practice', *Journal on the Art of Record Production*, no. 5 (July 2011); Everett, 'Making Sense of Rock's Tonal Systems'; 'Tabs That Show the Theory behind Songs - Theorytab', accessed 28 March 2018, https://www.hooktheory.com/theorytab. Most of the songs analysed were popular in the USA or UK.
[36] Dave Carlton, 'I Analyzed the Chords of 1300 Popular Songs for Patterns. This Is What I Found'. *The Hooktheory Blog*', 6 June 2012, http://www.hooktheory.com/blog/i-analyzed-the-chords-of-1300-popular-songs-for-patterns-this-is-what-i-found/.
[37] An analysis of chords directly preceding the tonic chord showed that 35% go from IV to I and 32% go from V to I. Dave Carlton, 'Part 2: I Analyzed the Chords of 1300 Popular Songs for Patterns. This Is What I Found', *The Hooktheory Blog*, 27 June 2012, http://www.hooktheory.com/blog/music-theory-analysis-1300-songs-for-songwriting-part2/.
[38] This has become known as the Four Chord Song progression, an idea popularised by Axis of Awesome's music video '4 Chords', in which the group performs a medley of a large number of pop songs that use this chord progression. The Axis of Awesome, *4 Chords | Music Videos | The Axis Of Awesome*, accessed 28 March 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oOlDewpCfZQ.

None of these statistics are unusual for tonal music, except perhaps the revelation that the IV-I progression is more common than V-I in mainstream pop. Everett interprets the IV-I pattern as a slight variation on the standard Schenkerian model, with IV functioning as a detour in the overarching course of V moving to I.[39] His argument is not entirely convincing, however, since the evidence for most pop songs following the Schenkerian model is slim; how does such a model accommodate the use of harmonic loops, which are frequently present in pop music, especially in recent decades? Songs with harmonic loops do not produce the tension caused by moving away from and the tonic and then back towards it, which is a crucial component of Schenkerian theory.

It is easier to make generalising observations about mainstream pop than alternative popular music, because the former is by its nature homogenising, while the latter is partly defined by its (relatively) experimental aesthetics. Bennett observes that

> The economic mechanisms that drive audience approval of songs have another important effect—they shape the art form itself. This contention is framed by the assumption that all art forms (that can be categorised) are at least part-defined by their constraints [ … ] Popular songs have, through audience-driven 'natural selection', evolved many characteristics in common with each other that, I suggest, define the form, or at least the popular mainstream of which less (literally) popular niche genre-songwriting activities form tributaries.[40]

The commercial emphasis on mainstream pop means that it is defined by constraints to a greater extent than either art music or alternative popular genres. Bennett compiled a list of characteristics based on his analysis of the singles and albums charts in the USA and UK between 1954 and 2010. He notes that

> this is not to say that all songs will exhibit these characteristics; rather, a majority of them will appear in almost all successful songs, and some mainstream classics will have most or all of them. For example, at the time of writing (October 2010) the current UK number 1 download is Bruno Mars' 'Just The Way You Are'—a song that exhibits 100% of the characteristics, as do the majority of songs in the current top 10. A comparison to the equivalent top 10 from any decade since 1960 gives much the same results, allowing us to speculate that some of the constraints that define song form may be constants, at least in mainstream hits of the last 50 years.[41]

Bennett's list of common characteristics of mainstream hits reads as follows:

[39] Everett, 'Making Sense of Rock's Tonal Systems'.
[40] Bennett, 'Collaborative Songwriting'.
[41] Bennett.

- First-person sympathetic protagonist/s, portrayed implicitly by the singer
- Repeating titular choruses (where the song is in chorus form), usually containing the melodic pitch peak of the song, which summarise the overall meaning of the lyric
- Rhyme—usually at the end of lyric phrases
- One, two or three human characters (or a collective 'we')
- Feature an instrumental introduction of less than 20 seconds
- Include the title in the lyric
- Sung between a two-octave range from bottom C to top C (C2 to C4), focusing heavily on the single octave A2 to A3.
- Thematic lyric content relating to (usually romantic) human relationships
- Use underlying 4, 8 and 16 bar phrases, with occasional additions or subtractions
- Based on verse/chorus form or AABA form
- 4/4 time
- Maintaining one diatonic or modal key
- Between 2 and 4 minutes in length[42]

Neither of the studies by Hooktheory and Bennett provide much information that we couldn't have already guessed regarding the aesthetics of mainstream pop. It is nevertheless useful to have empirical confirmation of the characteristics—however generalised—of this music, which Bennett's list provides. Since the most obvious features of mainstream pop are accounted for through these studies, it is easier to identify extraordinary characteristics of boy band music specifically which set it apart from other kinds of chart pop.

That said, boy band pop does not contain many musical features that fall outside the constraints of generic mainstream pop identified by Bennett. In terms of form, harmony and tonality, there is little to distinguish boy band songs from other chart hits. Most boy band songs are in verse-chorus form, or occasionally strophic form. Verse-chorus form has dominated mainstream pop music since the 1960s, and it is extremely rare for boy band pop to deviate from this structure. Neither do boy band songs generally deviate from the norm in their harmonic structure. Songs usually rely heavily on the four most common chords in popular music (which we are already familiar with): I, IV, V, and vi. The verse and chorus of the Backstreet Boys' 'I Want It That Way', which is one of the most famous boy band songs, exclusively use these four chords. Nevertheless, there are examples of boy band songs (and other mainstream

pop songs) that employ more colourful harmonic devices. For example, as Figure 4.1 demonstrates, the chorus in Backstreet Boys' 'Shape of My Heart' features chord iii, as well as a secondary dominant chord (V/V):

| | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| I | - | IV | I | V | V(4/2) | iii | - |
| vi | I(6/4) | V/V | - | IV | - | V | - |
| I(sus4) | | | | | | | |

Figure 4.1. *'Shape of My Heart' chorus harmony (key: D major)*

Harmonic flourishes such as this, however, by no means indicate that the song has strayed outside the norm of functional diatonic tonal practice. There are many similar instances of harmonic colouring in all genres of mainstream pop.[43] The harmony of boy band pop, then, is neither more banal nor more experimental than the average mainstream song. In general, neither structural nor harmonic characteristics constitute a significant factor that sets boy band music apart from other mainstream pop. As such, the form of (most) boy band pop is not worth commenting upon. In an analysis of Lady Gaga's hit song 'Poker Face', Dietrich Helms argues that a focus on form in mainstream pop is often beside the point, because it does not reveal any new information about one song compared to another:

> Form is definitely not the problem in 'Poker Face', or rather the form of 'Poker Face' does not function to give its interpreters a hint to think about the poetics of the song. If my object of study were the score of a sonata by Beethoven I would have to muse a lot about introduction, exposition, development and recapitulation and the fact that Beethoven troubles me to find out where the one formal element begins and the other ends. The individual form of the composition and its deviations from the standard model of sonata, its use of harmony and the thematic and motivic work would be important starting points of my interpretation.
>
> Here, however, everything is obvious; this 'Poker Face' can be read like an open book. The formal parts of the song are easily recognised.
>
> [ … ]
>
> Other than in my example of the Beethoven sonata the form of 'Poker Face' confirms the standard rather than challenges it. Its form does not raise any

[42] Bennett. We can assume here that Bennett refers to middle C as C3.
[43] For an overview of the different tonal and harmonic systems used in popular music, see Everett, 'Making Sense of Rock's Tonal Systems'.

> issues like 'Why did Lady Gaga compose it this way and not the way all other songs are composed?', 'Why do I feel irritated when listening to the chorus?'. Even as a musicologist you may listen to the song without wondering about its form. A musical form that fulfils all expectations, that is in line with the standard, loses its informational value like a sentence in a speech act loses informational value with every repetition. We may analyse and describe it, but it does not offer any clue for further interpretation.
>
> This means that it may be difficult to describe 'Poker Face' as a piece of art music, as in most definitions of art the original, individual formation of a medium seen on the background of formal models and expectations of the public plays an important role. This does not mean that 'Poker Face' is composed badly or primitively, though. For most listeners the changes in the structure of the song simply fulfil a different function: they are not meant to be poetic but phatic.[44]

Helms recognises that the commercial nature of mainstream pop means that it fulfils a different function to either art music or 'alternative' popular genres, and should therefore be analysed on its own terms. Like 'Poker Face', songs by boy bands tend to confirm, rather than challenge, the standard pop song form.

The only characteristic identified by Bennett that boy band music is likely to stray from is 'maintaining one diatonic or modal key'. The modulation up a tone or semitone around two-thirds of the way through a song, common in boy band music, means that the song will finish in a different key to that in which it began. This straightforward songwriting device that adds tonal variation and emotional intensity towards the end of a song has been identified by Dai Griffiths as an 'elevating modulation', since it shifts the whole of the remainder of the song upwards in pitch.[45] Although the elevating modulation appears in other popular genres, the frequency with which it was used by boy bands in the 1990s and 2000s has led to its particular association with this format. As Griffiths notes, 'for my undergraduate students around 2010, the modulation carried strong association with the Irish "boy-band" Westlife'.[46] Griffiths observes that the elevating modulation has become known as a hallmark of manufactured pop, and is often derided as a cliched gesture:

[44] Dietrich Helms, 'Pragmatic "Poker Face": Lady Gaga's Song and Roman Jakobson's Six Functions of Communication', in Ralf von Appen et al., eds., *Song Interpretation in 21st-Century Pop Music*, 76–79. The poetic function 'brings the form of the message to the addressee's attention emphasising its beauty or constructedness', while phatic signs 'make a piece of music interesting without being thought provoking'. Helms, 75; 83.
[45] Griffiths, 'Elevating Form'. Griffiths notes that this kind of modulation has variously been referred to as 'truck driver's', 'pump-up' or 'crowbar' modulation, though I prefer Griffith's more neutral and technically descriptive term 'elevating modulation'.
[46] Griffiths, 28.

> The elevating modulation also brings with it an associative sense of cliché. Consider recording artists who have by and large avoided the elevation: the Rolling Stones, Bob Dylan, Leonard Cohen, Van Morrison, The Beatles. These artists were certainly given to expressing themselves musically, and to making statements through words, and that may have been enough, the elevating modulation imparting too strong a sense of following a predetermined path. In relation to which, elevation's home in arrangement is important, arrangement with its functional air, and someone else's job, rather than song writing or composition per se, with their sense of personal commitment and conviction.[47]

Here Griffiths emphasises the elevating modulation's perceived inauthenticity, due in part to its association with arrangers, rather than original songwriters. According to rock ideology, arrangers, who 'only' re-arrange what someone else has already written, are perceived to be less capable of immediate personal expression compared to songwriters. Many 1990s and 2000s boy band songs (especially by the Irish groups Boyzone and Westlife) are arranged covers of pop songs from earlier decades. Characterising elevating modulation as 'someone else's job' emphasises the division of labour which is integral to the perceived inauthenticity of 'manufactured' pop. Griffith's comments suggest that the elevating modulation is a reliable, functional and obvious way of creating emotion or feeling in a song, less 'authentic' than doing something original with the harmony, timbre, or melody. Its straightforward application means that it does not take much time or effort to produce, and is therefore a cost-effective technique. This explains its prevalence in manufactured pop formats. Griffiths observes that the elevating modulation has been perceived as a money-making tactic, even if he does not agree with this accusation.[48]

Frith suggests that pop musicians can be distinguished from rock musicians because the former *perform* sincerity, while the latter simply *are* sincere. Writing about Elton John's performance of his popular ballad 'Candle in the Wind' at Princess Diana's funeral, Frith proposes that the public mourners applauded John 'less for *being* sincere than for *performing* sincerity'.[49] He explains that 'Elton John is a pop not a rock

[47] Griffiths further observes of the elevating modulation: 'that it is a device critically derided is easy to establish, both in the non-academic and academic domains, and this derision might even constitute part of its status as so-called 'popular music'. A lot of name calling is directed at the elevating modulation, as a fate avoided by, for example, the regular shift from tonic to dominant in the major-key sonata form'. Griffiths, 24.

[48] 'Ricci is more guarded, but a couple of points show a telling if wholly unsubstantiated association between the technical device and the venality of money making: a Chicago track fades on its new key "hopefully long enough in the minds of consumers for the songwriters, producers, and band members to make a handsome profit," while the footnote adds that the modulation could be "cheap" as a "way to extend a song whose paucity of ideas could not sustain it for an acceptable length"'. Griffiths, 25.

[49] Simon Frith, 'Pop Music', in Frith, Straw, and Street, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Pop and Rock*, 93 (italics original).

star because his authenticity—the authenticity of his expressed emotions—is not an issue. "Candle in the Wind" is not a song of self-exposure; it was not written to mark off John's difference, his unique artistic sensibility. It was, rather, a pop song, designed for public use'.[50] The elevating modulation is a clear sign of the performance of sincerity, and its particular association with Westlife is linked to the fact that the group performs sincerity with more intensity than any other boy band.[51] Westlife favoured the power ballad, and David Metzer describes the elevating modulation as the 'cliché hallmark' of this song form.[52] Metzer identifies the power ballad's primary musical features as 'a slow tempo (perhaps the most characteristic feature of the numbers), lyrical melodic lines, rich harmonies to support those lines, melody and accompaniment textures to highlight them, and basic verse/chorus forms',[53] and distinguishes the form as a particularly standardised type of popular music:

> 'Formulaic' is a common swipe made at the numbers but, putting aside the negative connotations, the term does fit the songs, as they adhere to predictable schemes. With the power ballad, there are both musical and expressive formulas. The schemes define the songs; they are the consistent elements across the various genre guises that the numbers assume. More conventional ballads and other repertoires, to be sure, have employed some or all of the formulaic gestures. What sets the power ballad apart is the degree to which those means have been standardised and how they are used to achieve a more consistently expansive expressive scale from the beginning to the end of a song.[54]

The elevating modulation is one ingredient in a consistent formula for these songs.[55] Here we have another way of conceptualising mainstream pop: what sets it apart from other kinds of popular music is the degree to which it has been standardised. The association of the power ballad with inauthenticity is cemented by its ubiquity in reality TV talent shows such as *X Factor* and *Pop Idol*, and its popularity with Adult Contemporary artists including Whitney Houston and Celine Dion.[56] Metzer specifically associates boy bands such as Boyz II Men, Backstreet Boys, NSYNC, and 98 Degrees with the R&B power ballad, critiquing the over-the-top use of melismas in

[50] Frith, 94.
[51] One of the best-known uses of the elevating modulation is Whitney Houston's power ballad 'I Will Always Love You', which is known for its heightened affect of sincerity.
[52] David Metzer, 'The Power Ballad', *Popular Music* 31, no. 3 (2012): 439.
[53] Metzer, 438–39.
[54] Metzer, 439.
[55] Metzer, 440.
[56] 'Reality television talent shows like X Factor and American Idol treat the songs as grist, using them throughout the early rounds and then showcasing a particular one during the final episode'. Metzer, 437. For a discussion of Celine Dion as one of the most derided pop artists ever, see Wilson, *Let's Talk about Love*.

R&B power ballads by Boyz II Men.[57] Like the elevating modulation, melismas constitute a straightforward device for emphasising emotional intensity, and in the R&B power ballad they have become a clichéd way to convey expression. Compared with other boy bands, Boyz II Men were particularly virtuosic in their singing, known for their high belting and vocal gymnastics. A high vocal tessitura, however, was favoured by most boy bands, with the tenor (and sometimes falsetto) vocal lines functioning (along with their clean-shaven demeanour) to highlight the boys' non-threatening, boyish sexuality.[58]

#### 4.2.3 Boy Band Music and Hybridity

Boy band music is characterised by a mixture of discernible musical styles which combine to produce music that is best defined by the neutral signifier 'pop'. Describing the music of NSYNC, the American boy band active in the late 1990s and early 2000s, Stephen Graham identifies a range of contemporary musical influences—including Eurodance and R&B—that are 'blended together, via typical backroom creative control, to produce pop surfaces of gleaming, safe hybridity'.[59] This quotation sums up the typical aesthetic template of boy band music. Hybrid musical styles are not unique to boy band music; as I noted in Chapter 1, much mainstream pop happily crosses genre lines in order to appeal to a wider audience than if it were confined to a single genre. The commercial impetus of this music means that it is willing to borrow from whichever genres are conducive to being sold. In the 1990s and early 2000s, mixed generic influences in a single song were much less common in mainstream pop than in the 2010s. Boy bands thus embraced musical hybridity at a time when it was not so common as it is now.[60] The stylistic hybridity of this music is often racially charged. Majority-white American boy bands such as the Backstreet Boys and NSYNC took from black urban forms but made them more palatable to a wide audience, such as by combining hip hop rhythms with smooth melodic lines. Graham notes that

[57] 'With R&B power ballads, melismas become filler, added to any word, even utilitarian prepositions and articles, and often result in distended phrases. They have become a rather cheap means of expression, so handy that singers unfurl them so as to make a song seem more emotional. In 'One Sweet Day' (1995) by Mariah Carey and Boyz II Men, for example, Carey and the group's lead singer Wanya Morris try to outdo each other in stretching out melismas and swirling more of them around the unadorned melody lines laid out by the other singers in the group. That the song is one of mourning and reflection can get lost in the melodic tinsel.' Metzer, 452.
[58] See Jamieson, 'Marketing Androgyny'.
[59] Graham, 'Justin Timberlake's Two-Part Complementary Forms', 449.
[60] Peter Robinson argues that generic cross-fertilisation in mainstream pop has become much more common in the last decade or so, partly because the Internet has helped to break down barriers between genres. Robinson, 'Pop, Rock, Rap, Whatever: Who Killed the Music Genre?' *The Guardian*, 17 March 2016, http://www.theguardian.com/music/2016/mar/17/pop-rock-rap-whatever-who-killed-the-music-genre.

> NSYNC flirted with the perceived authenticity of various black urban forms, from the balladry of groups such as Boys II Men to the swinging R&B of New Edition, while sticking closely to marketable 'white' imagery all the same. [ … ] In this NSYNC managed the neat pop trick of successfully juggling complex racial and generic signifiers for commercial and creative ends that also defines many other acts, from recent boybands such as New Kids on the Block to earlier figures like Elvis Presley.[61]

Pop music has a long history of marketing black musical forms to white audiences by coating them with a safe and accessible white facade: by employing groups of mostly white young men to perform the music. There is a tendency among critics and scholars to receive the aspects of the music which stem from black traditions as those which give pop music its credibility, while the glossy commercial finish of the sounds and imagery is implicitly read as white. Boy band music is no exception to this ideology, which clearly comes through in the presentation of Boyz II Men. The group was composed entirely of black members and released music that was more clearly situated in R&B and soul than other boy bands at the time. In their dress and demeanour, however, Boyz II Men imitate a trope of whiteness by frequently dressing in suits: the quintessential white man uniform. Their matching outfits, like the Beatles before them, present the group as a safe, unified barbershop quartet. This may have been an attempt by Boyz II Men to combat the assumption of their lowered class status (which is often presumed with black musical acts) by adopting the signifying tropes of wealth and respectability in order to gain legitimacy with white audiences.

The idea that black musical forms are inherently more 'authentic' is reflected in the contrasting critical reactions to Westlife compared with American boy bands like Boyz II Men and NSYNC.[62] While Boyz II Men have received prestigious Grammy awards for their music, and are even credited with developing the new musical style of New Jack Swing in the early 1990s, Westlife is often perceived as one of the most inauthentic of all the 90s and 2000s boy bands.[63] They are also one of the most unapologetically white boy bands. Their music avoided black urban styles, rejecting the up-tempo tracks with complex rhythms favoured by NSCYNC and the Backstreet Boys, instead producing languid pop ballads with a steady metre and straight rhythms.[64] Westlife's striking whiteness must be understood within the context of their Irish nationality: they projected an unmistakably white Irish identity which contrasted with the relative

[61] Graham, 'Justin Timberlake's Two-Part Complementary Forms', 448–49.
[62] Stephen Graham has noted the progressive musical style of NSYNC's later albums. Graham, 449.
[63] Boyz II Men's track 'Motown Philly' has been credited with developing the New Jack Swing style. On Westlife's inauthenticity, see John O'Flynn, *The Irishness of Irish Music* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), 179; Sullivan, 'Boyz to Men: Irish Boy Bands and Mothering the Nation'; Hamish MacBain, 'Listomania - The 10 Worst Boybands Ever', *NME*, 21 October 2011, https://www.nme.com/blogs/nme-blogs/listomania-the-10-worst-boybands-ever-762370. Westlife were extremely commercially successful, with the third most UK number 1 hits of all time.

multiculturalism of British and American society at the time.[65] Even within the context of the boy band format, in which any hint of sexual deviancy was rare, Westlife's image was especially clean-cut and socially conservative. This is demonstrated by the traditional family values advocated in the track 'Beautiful in White':

> With this ring I
> Say to the world
> You're my every reason
> You're all that I believe in
>
> [ … ]
>
> And if a daughter is what our future holds
> I hope she has your eyes
> Finds love like you and I did
> Yeah, and when she falls in love, we'll let her go
> I'll walk her down the aisle
> She'll look so beautiful in white[66]

Continuing the tradition of romantic balladry, Westlife capitalised on the vision of a romanticised Ireland. Rather than turning to styles from black genres, Westlife's particular brand of pop hybridity used instrumentation and lilting melodies that are clear tributes to Irish folk music—heard for example in the instrumental introduction to 'Seasons in the Sun'.[67] These folk influences were given the treatment (and sound production) of a glossy pop finish, so that Westlife's music did not sound out of place in the charts, and appealed to a wide international audience. This unmistakably white vision of Irish nationalism is also projected by Boyzone in their 2014 album *Dublin to Detroit*, in which the boy band perform covers of Motown hits. Here, Boyzone recognise their debt to black music while taking it and whitewashing it. A two-star review of the album in *The Irish Times* describes the cover style as 'closer to karaoke than anything else', adding, 'with a cheesy backing track providing the music, the vitality and soul of most of these songs are rendered flat and schmaltzy'.[68] The racialised language here is clear, as the reviewer notes that, in the hands of the white

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[64] An exception to this is Westlife's track 'No No', which is up-tempo with a lively percussion track.
[65] See Sullivan, 'Boyz to Men: Irish Boy Bands and Mothering the Nation'; McLaughlin and McLoone, 'From Men to Boys'.
[66] KrisKross75, *Westlife - Beautiful in White*, accessed 28 March 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XRuDQ6aYeD0.
[67] westlifeVEVO, *Westlife - Seasons In The Sun (Official Video)*, accessed 28 March 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xdv83MFJd7U.
[68] Lauren Murphy, 'Boyzone: Dublin to Detroit', *The Irish Times*, 20 November 2014, https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/music/boyzone-dublin-to-detroit-1.2008969.

boy band, the Motown music loses its implicitly black 'soul'. Like Boyzone, Westlife's conservative demeanour is also reflected in their penchant for cover songs.

The contrast between Boyz II Men on the one hand and Westlife (and Boyzone) on the other demonstrates the (relative) diversity of musical styles possible within the boy band format. While musical hybridity may be a trait common to all boy bands, different groups vary in the styles they choose to take from. Boyz II Men had a strong R&B influence; NSYNC drew on hip hop elements (among other styles); Westlife utilised the pop ballad and Irish folk influences. Distinct boy band styles can be identified according to both geography and time period. It is arguably little wonder that Westlife and Boyz II Men present such a great contrast in sound, given that they reached the height of their popularity a decade apart from each other (Boyz II Men in the early 90s and Westlife in the early 2000s), on different sides of the Atlantic. It also stands to reason that the USA-based groups Backstreet Boys and NSYNC were more heavily influenced by the distinctly American genre of hip hop, while British and Irish groups like Westlife, Boyzone and Take That veered away from this style. In terms of musical aesthetics, then, all boy bands shared a basic pop sound, but further to this each had their own signature style, which can cynically be described as a Unique Selling Point. Following the rules of the marketable package of 'manufactured' pop, boy bands were simultaneously standardised and novel.

This chapter has already introduced the power ballad as a favoured song type of many of the 90s and 2000s boy bands, which from its inception was a hybrid form. Metzer observes that the power ballad 'emerged in the 1970s pop recordings of Barry Manilow and others, and from early on crossed genre lines, including pop, rock and R&B'.[69] The power ballad's natural inclination towards stylistic hybridity renders it eminently suitable for use by boy bands. As the favoured form for *Pop Idol* and *X Factor* winners, the power ballad has always been a highly commercial format. It is able to latch onto and take what it wants from numerous different genres, a feature which it shares with the boy band format. Chapter 1 observed that mainstream pop, compared with more alternative kinds of popular music, is much less likely to discriminate between genres. Boy bands' embracing of the power ballad, then, signifies a marriage of two highly commercial formats that pay little attention to genre categorisation.

It is a mistake to conceive of boy band music as a genre. Just as 'manufactured pop' is more of a socio-economic signifier than an aesthetic one, it might be more fitting to regard boy band music as a socio-economic formula than a genre with identifiable aesthetic boundaries. This idea is intimated by Duffett, and Morley's declaration that 'boybands have little to do with pop music' is also suggestive of this

[69] Metzer, 'The Power Ballad', 437.

notion.[70] Most genres and sub-genres of pop music consciously define themselves in opposition to other styles, with each genre aiming to carve out its own distinct aesthetic space. Whether this is UK grime separating itself from American styles of hip hop, or the riot grrrl feminist punk movement distinguishing itself from the male-dominated indie rock scene of the early 1990s, usually the impetus for crafting a particular aesthetic is linked to socio-political factors regarding the people and place from which it emerged. In contrast, boy band pop willingly embraces other styles of music, gladly taking what it can from an unlimited number of genres. In this sense highly commercial mainstream pop such as boy band music operates in a different socio-economic sphere from most other kinds of music.

## 4.3 The Feminist Response to Boy Band Fandom

Feminist resistance to the dominant patriarchal narrative of popular culture has recently materialised in a body of research that explores the pleasures experienced by women and girls through boy band fandom. Studies of fans of Take That, Boyzone, and One Direction, mostly conducted by female scholars, have pushed back against misogynist assumptions by presenting a specifically female brand of fandom as a worthy topic of study.[71] From a cultural studies perspective this work is certainly valuable, and should be considered a progressive development in the ongoing struggle for gender equality both within and outside academia. The research is often pervaded by an air of knowing defiance, as female scholars are acutely aware of the dismissive condescension frequently aimed at both boy bands and their fans. This somewhat defensive attitude is aptly encapsulated in the title of an article by Sandra R. Garcia: 'Yes, I'll admit it, I like boy bands, so what?'[72] This specifically feminist response bears an affinity to the wider movement within cultural studies which disputes the Adornian doctrine that (ostensibly) characterises consumers—especially consumers of pop music—as uninformed, passive dupes wholly at the mercy of a manipulative, profit-driven culture industry. Feminist critique adds a gendered angle to this Marxist analysis: as Bethan Jones observes, 'girls have typically been seen as passive consumers who were duped (much as fans more broadly were) into buying lightweight, vapid commodities'.[73] Needless to say, so-called manufactured pop is often regarded as the epitome of this kind of commodity. The normative heterosexual male dismissal of boy bands and their fans combines a bias towards 'highbrow' cultural forms with a disdainful attitude towards female sexuality, outward displays of emotion

[70] Duffett, 'Multiple Damnations', 191; Morley, 'Paul Morley Showing Off ... Boybands'.
[71] This research was set out in note 3 of the current chapter.
[72] Garcia, 'Yes, I'll Admit It, I like Boy Bands, so What?'
[73] Jones, '"I Will Throw You off Your Ship and You Will Drown and Die"', 53. A similar point was addressed in Chapter 1 of this thesis.

(traditionally coded as feminine), and youth (a demographic which is often misunderstood by older scholars). As Daisy Asquith points out, One Direction fans 'have adopted a generalised sense of shame about their fandom, taught to them by a patriarchal society that looks down on expressions of extreme emotion, teenage passion, mainstream pop, and female sexuality'.[74]

Tom Rowley's review in *The Telegraph* of a documentary directed by Asquith on One Direction fans, *Crazy About One Direction,* constitutes a striking example of the misogyny that conditions society's aversion to boy band fans.[75] Rowley dismisses not only the fans themselves, but also the very idea that they should be of interest to a documentary-maker. He insists that, despite One Direction's status as a household name, the documentary 'still proved perplexing for any adult viewer', a quote which demonstrates the wide gulf in understanding and experience that exists between adult men (which, until relatively recently, has been the normative identity for both scholars and critics of popular culture) and young women.[76] The implicit sexism in Rowley's stance assumes that the default 'adult viewer' is male; on the contrary, we can presume that any adult female viewer (such as myself) who remembers harbouring a similar infatuation for male pop idols (be it Elvis Presley, the Beatles or Robbie Williams) is unlikely to find the concept of extreme female fandom perplexing. Rowley's attitude mirrors the common assumption that the average music fan is male, an idea which is critiqued by Brabazon: 'Throughout much of the history of popular music, the default audience has been female. What the boy band era confirmed was the truth of popular music history. The "serious" critics require audiences to be male. In actuality, the audience is female'.[77]

Rowley makes fun of the subjects of the documentary, in a tone which belittles their expressions of fandom:

> Crazy About One Direction (Channel 4) still proved perplexing for any adult viewer. For the show, which charted the increasingly desperate attempts of the band's most devoted followers to meet their idols, required us to master a new lexicon, from 'Directioners' (fans) to 'superfans' (the same with added decibels).
>
> Then there was 'shipping'—used by fans to describe their support for an imaginary relationship between the band members. One girl, who had dreamt

[74] Asquith, 'Crazy about One Direction: Whose Shame Is It Anyway?', 68.
[75] Daisy Asquith, 'Crazy About One Direction' (Channel 4, August 2013); Tom Rowley, 'Crazy About One Direction, Channel 4, Review', *The Telegraph,* 15 August 2013, http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/tvandradio/10245962/Crazy-About-One-Direction-Channel-4-review.html.
[76] Rowley, 'Crazy About One Direction, Channel 4, Review'.
[77] Brabazon, *Popular Music*, 220.

> up a fling between Styles and Tomlinson, told us: 'I don't ship them as a couple, I ship them as a bromance'. Well, quite.
>
> There were scores of uninsightful interviews in teenagers' bedrooms, in front of walls smothered with pictures of the band. 'What makes them amazing?' a group of fans was asked, with predictable—and high-pitched—results.
>
> Interviews with the most obsessive fans were more engaging. Asked where she had waited for band members, a pink-haired girl replied: 'Harry's house, Louis's house… They say I'm a stalker, but I don't mind'. We were also shown messages sent by another fan on Twitter, apparently threatening to commit suicide if the band did not respond. There was no attempt to explore the issue, however, and the film quickly returned to an interview with a 17 year-old who told us she only wears braces because Horan has made them a fashion accessory.[78]

Here Rowley implicitly criticises the documentary for focusing on apparently shallow topics such as stalking and fashion accessories. His ageism is demonstrated in his unwillingness to engage with the language of female youth culture: surely it should not be difficult for anyone to understand the meaning of 'superfan'. Rowley's insistence that this language is 'perplexing' shows a strong reluctance to engage with a phenomenon outside of his immediate cultural milieu. His emphasis on the fans' high-pitched screaming is reductive, serving to Other the fans and remind the reader of their gender and their youth. Although never explicitly stated, it is clear that Rowley considers the behaviour of the fans to be beneath his attention.[79] He fails to mention the fan art and fan fiction created by the girls, which constitute imaginative acts of creative agency. Rowley's review is a typical example of an older male critic not only misunderstanding, but refusing to attempt to understand girls' sexual desire. Comparing One Direction fandom to Beatlemania, Rowley observes that 'then, at least, documentary-makers realised their more interesting subject was in front of the barriers', suggesting that a focus on the boy bands themselves, rather than their fans, is a worthier topic of study.[80] Given the conventional and interchangeable personae of One Direction, however, I am inclined to disagree with this assumption. The underwhelming personalities (and musical skills) of the band members, in fact, render the issue of the girls' obsessive fandom even more interesting, prompting us to consider how and why these unexceptional artists can stir up such an extreme level of devotion in a young female audience.

[78] Rowley, 'Crazy About One Direction, Channel 4, Review'.
[79] In her documentary, Asquith sought to push back against this dismissive attitude towards boy band fans. Her sympathetic lens portrayed the One Direction fans as well-rounded and interesting subjects.
[80] Rowley, 'Crazy About One Direction, Channel 4, Review'.

This demographic disjunction between young female fans of boy bands and middle-aged men who (usually) find it difficult to understand their fandom has provided fuel for several comedy videos. In a *Saturday Night Live* sketch, the middle-aged actor Paul Rudd portrays a superfan of One Direction.[81] He is shown among a group of tweenage fans backstage at a One Direction concert waiting to meet the band, sticking out like a sore thumb due to his age and gender. He prides himself on being the most serious One Direction fan present and shames the younger girls with his superior 'insider' knowledge about the personal life of the band members. The musical parody group The Key of Awesome created a satirical video of One Direction's song 'One Thing', which features an older man becoming a huge One Direction fan, attending a concert among a group of young girls, and again, sticking out like a sore thumb.[82] The humour in both these satirical videos stems from the extreme unlikelihood of an adult man ever becoming a boy band superfan. Boy band fandom is portrayed as a closed community of girls whereby the idea of an older man entering this community is laughable.

Feminist scholars and critics have celebrated boy band fandom as a liberating safe space in which girls can explore their developing sexuality.[83] Asquith observes that it is 'an explicitly feminist mission to celebrate this unashamed display of teenage girls' desire'.[84] Brabazon notes that boy bands allow girls to subvert the conventionally male gaze and instead turn it towards their own object of desire: 'while patriarchal culture is organised around the presentation of a female body for the consumption by men, boy bands were different and disruptive, structured to enable, celebrate and encourage the female gaze on a male performer's body'.[85] Expressions of fans' desire can be surprisingly creative and non-conformist. Asquith devotes a portion of her documentary to the phenomenon known as *Larry shipping*, in which fans fantasise about two members of One Direction (Harry Styles and Louis Tomlinson) who engage in a (fictional) romantic relationship with each other. *Larry shipping* has inspired a substantial body of creative work from the fans, including fan art and fan fiction. It constitutes a radical expression of female sexuality within a context where it might be assumed that female desire exclusively manifests itself in a straightforwardly heterosexual manner: the societal stereotype is a female fan fantasising about herself

[81] Saturday Night Live, *One Direction Concert Line - Saturday Night Live*, accessed 26 March 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1TPnb8gGW2o.
[82] The Key of Awesome, *One Direction - One Thing PARODY! Key of Awesome #61*, accessed 26 March 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kgDEzFuCK8k.
[83] This escapist environment in which girls can explore their sexuality is rendered even more invaluable by its rarity: in a patriarchal society that is still much more comfortable with the idea of male sexual desire than female sexual desire, girls have fewer outlets than boys for expressions of their sexuality. Boy bands thus fill a void in a market which has historically overlooked the sexual needs of young women.
[84] Asquith, 'Crazy about One Direction: Whose Shame Is It Anyway?', 80.
[85] Brabazon, *Popular Music*, 220.

being in a romantic and/or sexual relationship with one of the band members.[86] As Asquith notes, *Larry shipping* is 'a rare deviant space of queer rebellion within a fandom that couldn't be more mainstream in its musical taste'.[87] This example of fans engaging in imaginative, creative acts subverts the normative model of heterosexual desire fed to them by the culture industry. The fans are thus seen to resist the characterisation as passive dupes that is all too often thrust upon them.

#### 4.3.1 An Alternative Feminist Response: Should we Demand Better Music for Girls?

In general, the resistance to patriarchal narratives in the feminist scholarly response to boy bands, as outlined above, signifies a positive and progressive development. Nevertheless, such work is sometimes hampered by its submission to the fallacy (which has tended to pervade cultural studies) that equates audiences with the aesthetic objects they consume. A lack of explicit recognition of the separation between the producers and consumers of mass culture respectively means that it is difficult to critique the producers and artefacts of that culture, without also implicating the audience. In general, popular music studies has, somewhat understandably, been keen to resist the separation between music and its social context and to disavow the legitimacy of the 'music itself'. It was, after all, a bias towards the 'music itself' in the study of art music that helped to exclude popular music from the academy. It is possible to convincingly argue that the study of popular music, compared with art music, demands a weightier focus on audiences due to its essential definition as an audience-driven cultural product. Acknowledgement of this fact, however, need not lead to the assumption that popular music and its audience should be considered one and the same. The girls who buy and listen to a One Direction album cannot be equated with the people involved in producing that album. Neither should we assume that because audiences choose to buy something, it must be the best possible product offered to them. While a person's identity is undeniably shaped by the music they listen to, they are not wholly defined by or limited to their choices as consumers. Fans are both more and less than the sum of the cultural products they choose.

An unbiased evaluation of the musical materials of boy bands is difficult to achieve because, as explained in Chapter 1, too often judgements of this kind are clouded by misogyny. It is arguably impossible to form an 'unbiased' aesthetic judgement of any music. Nevertheless, the masculinist bias of rock ideology that has pervaded popular music studies means that boy band music has been a particular victim of sexist attitudes. Critics' judgements about the demographic of boy band audiences influence their judgements about the music itself, so that the casual

[86] Of course, many fans fantasise in this manner as well.
[87] Asquith, 'Crazy about One Direction: Whose Shame Is It Anyway?', 80.

misogyny in the face of the audience becomes solidified in the critics' aesthetic judgement. In this case, the aesthetic judgement is merely a cover for the misogyny. Feminist critics and scholars have needed to push back against this fundamental misogynist attitude as an initial task in the project of taking boy bands—and their fans—seriously. In the wake of much valuable feminist work of this kind in the last few years, it is now possible to focus attention on the distinction between the music and the fans without necessarily falling victim to sexist ideology. No longer must we be confined by the assumption that criticism of boy band music automatically extends to a criticism of its female fan base. It should be possible to take this music seriously—and certainly take its fans seriously—while still submitting it to critical evaluation. Feminism and Marxism can be used in conjunction with one another to develop a nuanced understanding of how boy band music functions in society. Such an understanding should avoid the pitfalls of placing too much weight on either structure or agency: that is, neither assuming that all boy band fans are passive dupes (a position which can all too easily stray into misogynist territory), nor wholly celebrating this music as a cultural product chosen by girls who are apparently entirely free agents. First, we should acknowledge that boy band fans are, to an extent, caught in a cultural superstructure, without placing any blame or accusations of stupidity on the fans themselves. Second, we can observe that boy band fans possess a limited amount of creative agency within this superstructure—*though such agency is not enough to justify the existence of the superstructure*. Finally, we might critique the nature of a society in which such a highly standardised musical and cultural product comes to be so important in the lives of so many young women and girls.

Boy band fandom has been noted for its function as escapism for girls who are desperately in need of relief from the sufferings that come from growing up in an unforgiving, patriarchal, capitalist society. The difficulties faced by many pre-teen and teenage girls have been well documented: these girls must deal with pressure to conform to narrowly proscribed ways of looking and acting, on top of the everyday demands faced by all children, from a difficult school or home life, to going through puberty, or experiencing bullying by peers. For girls from economically deprived backgrounds such trials are often amplified, as they feel the pressure of a culture that demands they keep up with the latest trends of consumption.[88] Rates of self-harm, eating disorders, and other mental health problems are scandalously high among teenage and pre-teen girls.[89] The activities of fandom—creating fan fiction and art,

[88] As I noted in Chapter 1, it was estimated in 2002 that girls aged between 9 and 14 constituted half of the entire record-buying public. Bickford noted in 2012 that children in the in the US directly influence around $200 billion in family spending. Bickford, 'The New "Tween" Music Industry', 418.

[89] A 2002 survey measuring the rates of self-harm for pupils aged 15-16 in 40 schools in England found a higher rate of self-harm in girls (11.2%) compared with boys (3.2%). A UK-based study in 2016 found that 14% of girls (compared with 11% of boys) aged 10-15 are unhappy with their lives in general, while 34%

attending concerts, listening to music, or simply daydreaming about boy band members from the comfort of one's bedroom—function as a 'safe space', providing a distraction from whatever anxieties might come from the drudgery of school and home life. Fans sometimes pursue these activities alone, sometimes with friends who are fellow fans, and sometimes with the vast online fan community that has emerged in the digital age. The comedian Sofie Hagen recounts how her obsession with Westlife—which included authoring numerous stories of fan fiction—helped her cope with the depression she experienced as a teenager.[90] *Crazy About One Direction* shows the girls fantasising about an alternative reality in which they make friends with and date the band members. One fan describes thinking about One Direction as like being in a safe bubble.[91] For another girl, One Direction fandom provides an escape from the harsh reality of her socio-economic situation; she grows up in a low-income family where she acts as a carer for her disabled mother and younger brother.[92] In the same way that drugs or alcohol often function as coping mechanisms for the individual sufferings brought on by society, an all-consuming obsession with One Direction provides a comparatively harmless dose of escapism for a group of girls who are otherwise suffering.

The aesthetics of boy band music help to construct the vision of boy bands as an escapist fantasy realm. One distinguishing sign of boy band music can be described as a 'shimmer' or 'chime' timbral effect, a brief gesture which sounds like the sweeping of wind chimes.[93] The sound imbibes the song with a sense of mystical otherworldliness, serving to heighten the make-believe realm of desire in which boy bands reside. Girls become interested in boy bands in an in-between stage when they are too old to believe in fairy tales but too young to have their heart broken by real men. Since (usually) there is no actual contact between the girls and their boy band crushes, the boy band members are imbued with an element of make-believe from the perspective of the girls. The shimmer effect adds to this sense of fantasy. Structurally, this effect is used to lead into a new section of the song: the verse, chorus or bridge. In Westlife's 'My Love' it is

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are unhappy with their appearance. In the Netherlands, a study between 1995 and 1999 found that females aged 15-19 years constitute 40% of all cases of Anorexia Nervosa. Keith Hawton et al., 'Deliberate Self Harm in Adolescents: Self Report Survey in Schools in England', *BMJ* 325, no. 7374 (23 November 2002): 1207–11; Judith Burns, 'UK Girls "Becoming More Unhappy"', *BBC News*, 31 August 2016, https://www.bbc.com/news/education-37223063; Frédérique R. E. Smink, Daphne van Hoeken, and Hans W. Hoek, 'Epidemiology of Eating Disorders: Incidence, Prevalence and Mortality Rates', *Current Psychiatry Reports* 14, no. 4 (1 August 2012): 407.

[90] 'Sofie Hagen', *Live from the BBC* (Netflix, 2016), https://www.netflix.com/watch/80182803?trackId=13752289&tctx=0%2C4%2C28e935a3-ed31-4ea2-b2d8-d0f17a388d65-27776643%2C%2C.

[91] Asquith, 'Crazy About One Direction'.

[92] Asquith.

[93] The shimmer effect is found in the ballads, rather than the dance tracks.

heard just prior to the first chorus, while in 98 Degrees' 'My Everything' it introduces the second verse.[94]

The escapist function of boy bands suggests that the cultural phenomenon can be perceived as a good thing, providing a remedy for social suffering that (as far as we know) has no especially dangerous side effects for the body or mind. After all, a teenage girl's obsession with a boy band is undoubtedly preferable to an addiction to drugs or alcohol, or recourse to anti-social behaviour, which are sometimes the chosen activities of young people seeking escapism. But rather than celebrating boy bands as a band aid for the sufferings of female childhood and adolescence, I suggest instead that we consider two things. First, if we are faced with a situation in which girls lead such unfulfilling lives that they require boy bands to serve as a distraction from these lives, should we not work to change this situation? Second, we might consider that boy bands, even as a means of escapism, nevertheless constitute an especially standardised—and thus potentially impoverished—cultural product: should we not demand something better for girls?

#### 4.3.2 Easy Listening, Escapism, and Gender

The 'easy listening' music of the American radio station KKSF fulfils a similar escapist function for women as boy band fandom does for girls. Elisabeth LeGuin outlines a feminist response to this 'easy listening' music. Like boy band music, the lyrical light jazz favoured by KKSF is often reviled as banal. Yet LeGuin defends this music, arguing that the 'spaciousness' it evokes provides a sanctuary where listeners, particularly women, can disengage and relax:

> For me the net effect of listening to KKSF is a sense of comfort and safety. The music establishes an environment, and assures me that that environment will not be disrupted [ … ] With the sense of safety can come pleasure, of the mild diffuse variety—intense pleasure being just as disruptive as fear—and relaxation of mental focus. The station's presentation of its music asks pretty explicitly that the music not be focused upon; focus is another form of arresting things.
>
> So: a safe 'place' to be; a 'place' where one is pleasantly relieved of the necessity of having to focus, make connections, and interact—a place free of demands.[95]

[94] westlifeVEVO, *Westlife - My Love (Official Video)*, accessed 28 March 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ulOb9gIGGd0&list=PL12F81D2F51546862; 98DegreesVEVO, *98º - My Everything*, accessed 28 March 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vz2lyq7kGms&list=PLee4kvhh-NjRFN10rIiE03_-xBStOqrFF.
[95] Elisabeth LeGuin, 'Uneasy Listening', *Repercussions* 3, no. 1 (Spring 1994): 6.

This music, suggests LeGuin, is not designed to be engaged with; she advocates a form of disengaged listening, and suggests that, for women, it is necessary to have this safe space in which they can switch off from reality for a while. She speaks of the 'damaged I', referring to the female listener, whose subjectivity is compromised by her struggle to lead a fulfilling life in a patriarchal society. Because of this, LeGuin argues, listening for women can never be 'easy', but is always acontested activity:

> What of the very great difficulties that arise prior to or as condition of the receptive experience of the work of art? If we have ever absorbed poison through our ears, been personally outraged, belittled, violated in any way by what we heard, suffered the kind of rape that comes from being told such experiences are necessary or that we deserved them—and who, particularly who that is female, can fairly say that they have never experienced this?—then listening must be on some level a contested activity, a site of conflict. The ears cannot be shut, alas, only the mind. We are all damaged listeners to some degree: the space we can inhabit within a piece of music will be shaped, delimited, by the extent of that damage, or at best, discovered through the work of reclamation. A recourse to 'easy' listening looks less like avoidance on the damaged listener's part than like hard-won achievement.[96]

Here LeGuin points out that listening is often difficult, and that women especially are frequently damaged by their listening experiences. 'Easy listening' thus provides relief—and crucially, it should be *allowed* to provide relief—for such women. The music of KKSF, like boy band music, provides an escape from reality.

An Adornian critique of this situation might suggest that this escape from reality constitutes an avoidance of taking action against the social conditions that lead to such suffering, and is thus a politically unproductive activity. Adorno writes:

> The frame of mind to which popular music originally appealed, on which it feeds, and which it perpetually reinforces, is simultaneously one of distraction and inattention. Listeners are distracted from the demands of reality by entertainment which does not demand attention either … Distraction is bound to the present mode of production, to the rationalized and mechanized process of labour to which, directly or indirectly, masses are subject. This mode of production, which engenders fears and anxiety about unemployment, loss of income, war, has its 'non-productive' correlate in entertainment; that is, relaxation which does not involve the effort of concentration at all.[97]

[96] LeGuin, 7–8.
[97] Adorno, 'On Popular Music', 458.

The fact that there is a need for these kinds of popular and ambient music that creates a 'safe space' away from reality, indicates the brokenness of the society in which we live rather than the value of such music. As Adorno asserts, 'a fully concentrated and conscious experience of art is possible only to those whose lives do not put such a strain on them that in their spare time they want relief from both boredom and effort simultaneously'.[98] That this music enjoys so much success in a damaged society, and perhaps especially in the parts of society that suffer the most (Adorno's popular music is popular with the economically disenfranchised; LeGuin suggests that female listeners may benefit most from her ambient music) does not necessarily serve to grant it validity. It may well be the case that a utopian society would have no place for this music, or this type of listening. In Adorno's theory, manufactured 'entertainment' music acts like a sedative, causing the listener to forget the dire reality of their situation. The factory worker returns home after a long shift, and he is considering revolting against his boss in protest against the exploitative working conditions. At home, however, he listens to pop music, which calms and distracts him so that all thoughts of revolution are put out of his head, and he returns to work the next day and goes on as normal; the capitalist wheel keeps on turning. The woman in an abusive relationship decides to leave her boyfriend, and so she packs her things, gets in the car and tunes the radio to KKSF. The music causes her to calm down, lose focus, experience pleasure, even, and consequently re-think her escape plan. Listening to the music, she realises that life's not so bad after all, really, and she turns the car around and returns to her boyfriend. The teenage girl who is bullied at school returns home, engulfs herself in the world of One Direction fandom, and is able to forget her sufferings to the extent that she decides not to report the bullying.

This, however, is an ungenerous interpretation of LeGuin's theory. She acknowledges Adorno's theory, but notes that her mode of listening is different. It 'is not merely the blank *refusal to think* that so offended Adorno', but rather 'a kind of alternate or diffused subjectivity, one less defined by polarization. The one who listens in disengagement exercises the option of encountering the musical work in a place of putative, experimental, fictional unity, one which neither denies the damaged *I* nor accepts it as a condition'.[99] LeGuin acknowledges the criticism that the music played on KKSF may be banal or impoverished. Pauline Oliveros is a composer who scorns the idea of easy listening music, and considers her music to be too 'difficult' to fall into such a category. LeGuin observes,

[98] Adorno, 458.
[99] LeGuin, 'Uneasy Listening', 8-9.

> Here we are back at the issue of content (or lack thereof), which sounds a lot like another word for signification; here too is a construction of the listener as one who can so easily be distracted, one who, it seems, will always prefer to avoid the serious, the painful, the difficult. (Adorno is lurking just around the corner here.) Without in any way denying the space for irresponsibility and escapism· that popular ambient music undoubtedly allows, I submit that rejecting it entirely for that reason is an ungenerous and possibly an unwise response. The space is also available, as Vollenweider acknowledges, for 'creative process'; that washed-out background may be all that the listener needs at the time. Music like Oliveros's will be there when it is time to pack up and move on.[100]

This suggests that LeGuin considers 'easy listening' music to be a temporary state, an imperfect remedy to a social problem. She suggests that this kind of music can exist alongside more difficult music such as Oliveros's, and that both fulfil different functions in the lives of women.

When considering boy band music, it is important to hold both LeGuin's and Adorno's theories in the balance at once. Space for easy listening and escapist music may indeed be welcome in a society which is fundamentally broken, and in the pockets of society that suffer the most from its broken state.[101] We should not lose sight, however, of the idea that in a society that is kinder to women and girls, easy listening music and boy band fandom might have no place.

#### 4.3.3 Queer Fans, Homoeroticism, and Homophobia

So far in this chapter I have assumed that the default boy band fan is female (and presumably straight). This, however, is a slightly skewed representation, since male fans (mostly gay or bisexual) of this music exist too.[102] In the patriarchal and heterosexist society of the 1990s and early 2000s, young queer men were as keen as were young women for a mainstream media product that accepted and encouraged audience desire for the male body.[103] The bands were often managed by queer men who understood the audience demographic of which they were a part. Several scholars

[100] LeGuin, 18.
[101] For work on pop music and easy listening, see Stan Hawkins, ed., *Pop Music and Easy Listening* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011).
[102] It is important to note that neither gender nor sex are binary, and we can assume that transgender, intersex, and genderqueer people are just as much a part of boy band fandom as those identifying as either cisgender female or male. The discourse surrounding boy bands and their fans, however, is still largely rooted in the cultural politics of the 1990s and 2000s, when sex was still regarded as binary and fans were understood to be comprised of two camps only: straight females and gay males. While the following section of the chapter is necessarily limited to a critique of this discourse, it is important to remember the inadequacy of such a framing in current society.
[103] A feature on boy bands in a 1999 issue of LGBT magazine *The Advocate* indicates that boy bands were popular with a gay male audience. Anderson Jones, 'The Boys in the Bands', *The Advocate*, 6 July 1999, 43.

have suggested that boy bands were subtly marketed towards a gay male audience as well as a straight female one. Even though it is commonly assumed that the singer addresses his love song to an imaginary female listener, Jamieson observes that the duet between Nick Carter and Brian Littrell in the Backstreet Boys' 'As Long as You Love Me' invites a dual interpretation: it could be read as Carter and Littrell singing to the female audience, or singing to each other.[104] If the possibility of the band members' homosexuality is opened up in such a way, queer male fans can more easily fantasise about themselves as the object of the singers' desire. Sheila Whiteley has noted the homoerotic imagery used by bands including Take That, Boyzone and Westlife.[105] This suggests that boy band managers were aware of the gay male market, and willing to cater to it.

While subtle nods to the queer fan base may have been acceptable to the managers, gay boy band members were often instructed to hide their sexuality and peddle the official line that they were straight, for fears that their coming out would alienate the female audience.[106] (The secrecy surrounding the sexuality of boy band members has led to rumours about the true nature of singers' sexuality. Robbie Williams, for example, has been compelled to deny numerous rumours that he is gay.)[107] The knowledge that not all of the boy band members were straight, along with the tactics used to cater to a gay male audience as identified by Jamieson and Whiteley, begs the question of whether the band members were performing homoerotic desire for their male fans, or for each other.

The scornful attitude towards boy bands in the popular media sometimes takes the form of homophobia, as dismissive accusations regarding boy band members' queer sexualities are intended to undermine the integrity of the cultural form. Several boy band parody videos have a homophobic edge, making fun of the idea that some—or all—of the boy band members are gay.[108] Such videos can be read as equally ridiculing to the LGBT community, to the female fans that are silly enough to develop crushes on boys who are actually gay and thus unavailable, and, of course, to the boy band members themselves. Such videos indicate an attempt to combat female sexual desire and gay male desire, both of which constitute destabilising forces in a patriarchal and

[104] Jamieson, 'Marketing Androgyny', 253–54.
[105] Whiteley, *Too Much Too Young*, 165.
[106] Craig McLean, '"I'm Gay and in a Boy Band!"', *The Guardian*, 12 November 2006, http://www.theguardian.com/music/2006/nov/12/popandrock10. Stephen Gateley in Boyzone, Markus Feehily in Westlife, and Lance Bass in NSYNC have all spoken about their experiences of this since the dissolution of the bands.
[107] Whiteley, *Too Much Too Young*, 165. Harry Styles and Louis Tomlinson have also felt the need to deny the rumour that they are in a gay relationship, which was a consequence of *Larry shipping* within the One Direction fandom.
[108] See, for example, DupayForLife, *Which Backstreet Boy Is Gay*, accessed 27 March 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y0Zc1JNfqfs; The Key of Awesome, *What Makes You Beautiful - One*

heterosexist society. As George Lipsitz notes, 'contempt for boy bands can be a covert form of homophobia, as well as a punishment meted out to young women and men for not yet mastering the codes of heterosexism'.[109] Straight men might feel excluded from a rare cultural product that is decidedly not for them. The discomfort created by the idea of voyeuristic female sexuality is dealt with by declaring boy band members to be gay, thus invalidating the expression of desire on the part of the female fans. This might be an indication that the idea of homoerotic boy bands is more acceptable than straight female desire and a man's voluntary submission to the female gaze. Often, any kind of self-objectifying performance by a man is dismissed as 'gay', because the act of sexualising oneself is so strongly associated with women, and is thus interpreted as effeminate. For men to insist that all boy band members are gay thus constitutes a denial of female desire and female sexuality. The example of *Larry shipping*, however, demonstrates that female fans have turned this tactic by male detractors of the boy band on its head. By taking two (straight) members of One Direction and imagining them to be in a relationship with each other, female fans essentially make the statement: 'I don't care if they're gay, I'm still attracted to them—in fact I might be attracted to them *even more*'. The queer creativity of *Larry* shippers—and their taking ownership of rumours centred on the sexuality of boy band members that, in other instances, might be promulgated by detractors of the boy band—thus combats both the sexism and homophobia of some boy band critics. Straight female fans participating in *Larry shipping*, or straight band member Harry Styles performing on stage while draped in a rainbow, constitute acts of straight solidarity with LGBT rights, thus further combating this.[110]

## 4.4 Conclusion

I was born in 1990. My childhood and early teenage years coincided with the golden era of boy bands and other bubblegum pop acts. Boy bands such as Boyzone, Westlife, Backstreet Boys, NSYNC, Blue, 5ive, and mixed-gender groups and solo artists including S Club 7, Steps, and Britney Spears played a formative role in my identity from around 8 to 12 years old. Mainstream pop from this era was the first kind of music that I actively consumed separately from my parents; its importance as a tool for gaining independence and even maturity should not be understated. Along with many

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*Direction Parody! Key of Awesome #57*, accessed 27 March 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t7CHfqg0wd8.

[109] Lipsitz, *Footsteps in the Dark*, 6.

[110] Yezmin Villarreal, 'Harry Styles Wore a Gay Pride Flag as a Cape', *Pride*, 4 September 2015, https://www.pride.com/one-direction/2015/9/04/harry-styles-wore-rainbow-flag-cape-one-direction-concert.

of my peers, I felt a strong sense of ownership towards this music, which seemed to have been made specifically for our generation.[111]

Although I had musical preferences as a child, I wasn't particularly discerning. While I learnt the piano from an early age, my necessarily limited musical experience (due to age) meant that I simply wasn't knowledgeable enough to construct informed judgements of taste. I liked music and was eager to listen to whatever was within reach, but at this beginning stage of indiscriminate exploration, I hadn't yet been exposed to enough music to feel I could afford to reject much of what I encountered. As a child, I did not devote much conscious thought to the aesthetic quality of the music that I consumed. Before the taste-forming era of my teenage years, my consumption of mainstream pop was largely influenced by what peers at school listened to. Research suggests that girls are socialised to enjoy mainstream pop much more than boys, who are socialised to be disdainful of it.[112] But neither was I particularly discerning when it came to classical or 'alternative' popular music; I simply played whatever pieces my piano teacher threw my way, and enjoyed whichever Beatles records my parents owned. Most children do not have the impetus or cultural nous to seek out new music; this is something that they—hopefully—develop as they grow up. This was especially the case in the time before the internet granted young people much more freedom to discover different kinds of music.

Why have I chosen to end this chapter with a detour into autobiography? In part, it is to demonstrate that the subjectivity of the author is always important in academic research, especially when such research focuses on music from the author's lifetime. I cannot escape my own biases when I write about boy band music and other forms of mainstream pop—and such biases are likely to be different to those of either Eric Weisbard or Tom Rowley, for example. But neither can I deny the fact that my response to boy band music—and mainstream pop in general—is fraught with contradiction, perhaps increasingly so since carrying out this research. Identity politics and the culture industry both constitute powerful forces which act on boy band music, and can work to push and pull this music—especially from the perspective of its reception—in seemingly opposing directions. While the 'ideal' mental state of being able to make 'neutral', clear-headed aesthetic judgements is ultimately fictional, with regards to boy band music, it is impossible to even come close to such a state until the misogynist discourse which pervades this music is overcome. But it is also very difficult to judge this music as people who are subject to—or victims of, depending on how one looks at it—the forces of the capitalist culture industry. To declare that girls

[111] John Horton's ethnographic study of girls in 2000 who were excited about the release of S Club 7's single 'Reach' suggests that I was not alone among girls of my generation in having S Club 7 fandom constitute an important part of my identity. Horton, '"The Best Thing Ever"'.

deserve a better or greater variety of cultural products to choose from is not necessarily to say that they would do better listening to Bob Dylan, Led Zeppelin, or any other music that is conventionally considered to fall on the 'authentic' side of the rock/pop binary. Granted, we do not necessarily need to value the music in order to value the audience of that music. This is not to say, however, that we should simply accept the situation as it is. We should no more automatically value music which is marketed towards girls than we should automatically devalue music which is marketed towards girls. Until we find a way out of the quandary described above, perhaps the most productive line of enquiry is to examine and critique the socio-economic context in which the music is produced and received. The first part of the chapter noted that boy band music operates in a distinct socio-economic sphere, and as such should be considered a format or a process, rather than a genre. There is reason to believe that the socio-economic process of how boy bands are formed, managed, and disseminated sets them apart from other kinds of pop music. But there is also reason to suspect that the particular emphasis on boy band music—rather than other kinds of music—as the music which is apparently most complicit with the culture industry is just as attributable to misogyny as to concrete socio-economic processes. It is only with a thorough understanding of such processes, however, that we can properly evaluate boy bands and their music. The relative lack of research on boy bands and other forms of mainstream and so-called 'manufactured' pop, however, means that our understanding of such a process is thus far limited.

In lieu of a conclusive judgement on the merits or pitfalls of boy band music, then, I shall end with the following. On the one hand, it should be noted that I listened to boy band and bubblegum pop at an age when I was not thinking critically about many things, including music. On the other hand, my interest in this music did not hamper my ability, as a musicologist and musician in later life, to make informed aesthetic judgements and think critically about music, capitalism, and the culture industry. If boy band music is a harmful product for young girls, my personal experience gives me little evidence to show in support of this. (I should note that social class is an important factor in assessing the musical experiences of each individual, though unfortunately it has been beyond the remit of this chapter.) The person who now performs Brahms and Berg, and listens to Björk and Pauline Oliveros, is the same person who, when younger, memorised all the lyrics to S Club 7's albums. The 'rock/pop' binary which pervades the dominant critical musical discourse does not easily accommodate the existence of such a multifaceted yet singular subject-position. Although my own experience of mainstream pop fandom represents one of many, it nevertheless begs the question of what really does more harm to women girls: the consumption of boy band

[112] Horton. Only the girls are interested in S Club 7—all the boys who are interviewed scornfully dismiss

music and other similar products of the culture industry, or the misogyny that influences critics' dismissal of boy bands? I am inclined to argue that the latter is more pernicious than the former. Though I have not arrived at a conclusive stance on boy band music, I can argue with certainty that it is unjustifiable to blame or ridicule young girls for consuming music that is marketed towards them. Chapter 4 has discussed the response to boy band music from scholars, critics, and fans; Chapter 5, meanwhile, examines the reaction to this music by parody artists. While most of these parody artists are male, the Conclusion introduces a female-produced boy band parody. This allows us to compare parody artists' responses to boy band music from each side of the gender divide, just as the present chapter has done with respect to scholars, critics, and fans.

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the pop group.

# CHAPTER 1

# PARODY AND POP

This first chapter serves to contextualise the case studies and analysis of later chapters, and explain the meaning and significance of 'parody' and 'mainstream' in the thesis title. In an overview of literature on musical parody and satire, I observe that although pop parody is an emerging area of study in academic discourse, the field lacks studies that engage with the musical aesthetics of pop parody. The exercise in categorisation of musical comedy and parody explains the rationale for focusing on the particular parodic case studies in later chapters. In assessing the line between musical comedy and parody I note that it is not always easy to decide whether a given song contains parodic elements. The final part of the chapter defines and contextualises 'mainstream' and 'manufactured' for the purpose of the thesis. I observe that although popular music studies evolved from a reliance on rock ideology to espousing a broadly 'poptimist' outlook, this has not prompted much interest in the aesthetics of manufactured pop such as boy band music.

## 1.1 Literature on Musical Parody and Satire

With the exception of literary studies, humanities disciplines have been slow to devote serious attention to parody and satire in any artistic medium. Musicology is typical in this regard. Recent years, however, have prompted an emerging body of work that focuses on irony, satire, parody and pastiche in western art music from the late 18th to the mid 20th century. Julian Johnson's chapter on irony in a recent volume on musical aesthetics provides an introductory survey of this area of research, while Esti Sheinberg's volume on irony, satire, parody, and the grotesque in Shostakovich is probably the most detailed study of the ways in which these phenomena can manifest themselves in music.[1] Scholarship on irony, parody and satire in late 20th and early 21st century music (including popular music) is likewise scant yet growing. Contributions include Turner's edited volume on irony in pop music aesthetics, Ellestrom's discussion of irony in the visual and musical arts, and Hawkins's analysis of parody in Björk.[2] Lillian Boxman-Shabtai presents a feminist analysis of YouTube pop parody,

[1] Johnson, 'Irony'; Sheinberg, *Irony, Satire, Parody and the Grotesque*. See also Scott Burnham's study of irony in the music of Haydn, and Johnson's work on Mahler and irony. Scott Burnham, 'Haydn and Humor', in *The Cambridge Companion to Haydn*, ed. Caryl Clarke (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 61–76; Julian Johnson, *Mahler's Voices: Expression and Irony in the Songs and Symphonies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).
[2] Turner, ed., *This Is the Sound of Irony*; Lars Ellestrom, *Divine Madness: On Interpreting Literature, Music, and the Visual Arts Ironically* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 2002); Stan Hawkins, 'Musicological Quagmires in Popular Music: Seeds of Detailed Conflict', *Popular Musicology Online*, no. 1 (2001), http://www.popular-

though her focus on videos which retain the music of the original song while humorously changing the visuals and lyrics means that her work does not touch on musical aesthetics.[3] David John Ferrandino's doctoral thesis on irony in late twentieth century popular music includes a chapter on Weird Al Yankovic, though focusing on the artist's polka medleys rather than his parody videos.[4] This scattered collection of literature, much of it produced in the new millennium, indicates a developing kernel of interest in the relationship between music and the various forms of semantic ambiguity.

In terms of methodology and theoretical focus, my thesis is distinct from much of this extant literature. With the exception of Ferrandino and Boxman-Shabtai, most of the aforementioned musicological studies are primarily concerned with the question of whether a piece of music is ironic, satirical, or parodic in the first place. They identify the musical aesthetic techniques through which one of these forms of semantic ambiguity may or may not be conveyed. My study, in contrast, need not devote so much time to investigating this foundational problem of the existence of satire or parody, because in all of the songs analysed, the parodic intent is clear from the outset. This stands in contrast to several of the studies on irony, satire and parody in art music—a type of music which, compared with pop, generally expresses its semantic ambiguity in ways that are subtler and more complex. The music of Shostakovich, for example, contains several layers of veiled parodic references that Sheinberg devotes much attention to uncovering, grappling with the semantic ambiguity of individual phrases as she does so.[5] The musical materials of pop are, by definition, generally much more obvious in their message. As Katherine Turner observes, 'popular music, perhaps, utilises irony (and satire, sarcasm, pun, parody…) more naturally and with less academic artifice than art music'.[6] Despite this, the chapters that comprise her edited volume on irony in pop music aesthetics focus predominantly on the ways in which irony manifests itself in the music in the first place, rather than evaluating the critical implications of this musical irony. My thesis, in contrast, is mainly concerned with what the songs do with this semantic ambiguity—that is, what critical function, if any, these techniques serve. The songs analysed in this thesis can together be taken to constitute a distinct genre of parodic songs; for these works, parody and

musicology-online.com/issues/01/hawkins.html. See also Claire Levy, *Musical Parody at the Late 20th and Early 21st Century* (Sofia, Bulgaria: Institute of Art Studies, 2012); John Covach, 'Stylistic Competencies, Musical Satire, and *This is Spinal Tap*', in *Concert Music, Rock, and Jazz since 1945: Essays and Analytic Studies*, ed. Elizabeth Marvin and Richard Hermann, (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 1995), 402-424; and Ethan Thompson, *Parody and Taste in Postwar American Television Culture* (New York; London: Routledge, 2010).

[3] Lillian Boxman-Shabtai, 'Reframing the Popular: A New Approach to Parody', *Poetics* 67 (1 April 2018): 1–12; Lillian Boxman-Shabtai, 'The Practice of Parodying: YouTube as a Hybrid Field of Cultural Production', *Media, Culture & Society* 41, no. 1 (2019): 3–20.

[4] David John Ferrandino, 'Irony, Mimicry, and Mockery: American Popular Music of the Late Twentieth Century' (University at Buffalo, State University of New York, 2015). On the legal disputes surrounding Yankovic's parody songs, see Charles J Sanders and Steven R Gordon, 'Stranger in Parodies: Weird Al and the Law of Musical Satire', *Fordham Intellectual Property, Media and Entertainment Law Journal* 1, no. 1 (1990): 37.

[5] See, for example, Sheinberg's analysis of parodic meaning in Debussy's 'Golliwog's Cakewalk'. Sheinberg, *Irony, Satire, Parody and the Grotesque*, 144-47.

[6] Turner, 'Introduction', 4–5.

satire are their *raison d'etre.* Their generic status signifies a crucial way in which these songs are set apart from the case studies in most of the extant musicological studies on semantic ambiguity, which tend to focus on music by 'serious' composers or pop artists whose general output is by no means always parodic or satirical.

In its relationship to existing scholarship, my thesis straddles two small yet growing bodies of literature. One is the body of work set out above, on 'serious' western art and pop music that contains glimpses of the satiric or parodic impulse. The other is research on music by comedians, which is even more scarce. The satirical songs of pioneering mid-twentieth century acts such as Beyond the Fringe, Monty Python, and Tom Lehrer, as well as more recent figures such as Tim Minchin, Rachel Parris, Bo Burnham, Bill Bailey, and Sarah Silverman, are usually considered to fall into the genre of 'novelty songs' or 'musical comedy'.[7] 'Musical comedy' is a somewhat vague term which could refer to a piece such as Mozart's 'Musical Joke', comic operas, and musicals as much as to stand-up comics who incorporate music as part of their act. The main artists analysed in my thesis—Flight of the Conchords, The Lonely Island, Axis of Awesome, Da Vinci's Notebook, Weird Al Yankovic, and Jon Lajoie—fall somewhere in between composers who happen to be funny and comedians who happen to play music (though these categories, as I shall discuss in the taxonomy below, are by no means concrete). They are equal part comedian and musician, and rely on music as a crucial medium for their jokes. The satirical attitude displayed in parodic pop songs can be traced back to light comedic musical entertainment such as John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera*, the operettas of Offenbach and Gilbert and Sullivan, the Berlin cabarets of pre-war Germany, and, later on, the Beatles parody band The Rutles and the spoof metal band Spinal Tap.[8] Satirical and parodic songs by musical comedians have received much more serious attention outside of academia than within it.[9] Several scholars have cited comedy's lack of cultural prestige and perceived commercialism as explanations for its dismissal in the academic sphere.[10] A notable exception to this is the recent edited volume *Music in Comedy Television,* which includes chapters on serval parodic pop acts that appear in my thesis,

[7] See Wagg, 'Comedy, Politics and Permissiveness'; Carpenter, *That Was Satire That Was*; Brian Logan, 'Forget the Funky Gibbon: How Musical Comedy Went from Square to Hip', *The Guardian*, 9 October 2015, http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2015/oct/09/musical-comedy-flight-conchords-weird-al-yankovic-tim-minchin-frisky-mannish. For a theorisation of comedy, see Dan O'Shannon, *What Are You Laughing At?: A Comprehensive Guide to the Comedic Event* (London: Continuum, 2012).

[8] See, for example, Alexander L. Ringer, 'Dance on a Volcano: Notes on Musical Satire and Parody in Weimar Germany', *Comparative Literature Studies* 12, no. 3 (1975): 248–62; Carolyn Williams, *Gilbert and Sullivan: Gender, Genre, Parody* (New York; Chichester: Columbia University Press, 2011); and William A. McIntosh, 'Handel, Walpole, and Gay: The Aims of The Beggar's Opera', *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 7, no. 4 (1974): 415–33.

[9] See, for example, Steven Otfinoski's (non-academic) survey of the genre, which includes a section on Weird Al Yankovic. Steven Otfinoski, *The Golden Age of Novelty Songs* (New York: Billboard Books, 2000). See also Peter Robinson, 'Lil Dicky and the Truth about Comedy Rap – It's Tricky!', *The Guardian*, 13 April 2018, http://www.theguardian.com/global/2018/apr/13/lil-dicky-interview-comedy-rap-rapper-freaky-friday-big-shaq-lonely-island; and Johnny Dee, 'Rise of the Vidiots: Meet SNL's the Lonely Island', *The Guardian*, 14 February 2009, http://www.theguardian.com/music/2009/feb/14/the-lonely-island-incredibad.

[10] See Liz Giuffre and Philip Hayward, eds., *Music in Comedy Television: Notes on Laughs* (London: Routledge, 2017), 2–3.

including Flight of the Conchords and The Lonely Island.[11] The political satire broadcast through satirical news and comedy programmes such *Have I Got News for You* in the UK, and *The Daily Show, The Colbert Report, Saturday Night Live* and *South Park* in the USA (to name but a few) has become the subject of a body of scholarly literature that, in some cases, evaluates the politically resistant potential of these programmes.[12] Since most of the songs analysed in this chapter exist in the format of YouTube videos, they can, to an extent, be situated within the increasing post-millennial trend for online audio-visual satirical entertainment that addresses politics, current affairs and pop culture. The following taxonomy of musical comedy and parody submits several contemporary musical comedians to academic scrutiny for the first time.

## 1.2 A Taxonomy of Musical Comedy and Parody

Chapters 2, 3, and 5 include close readings of several parody songs produced since the new millennium. These case studies constitute only a small snapshot of twenty-first century pop parody, which has grown into a large and diverse collection, particularly since the advent of YouTube. In the present chapter, a discussion of the different extant types of musical parody and comedy helps to understand the significance and function of the type parody songs that feature in later chapters. In this part of the thesis I set out the first comprehensive taxonomy of twenty-first century musical parody. Drawing on a range of specific examples, I illustrate the key differences between the types of musical parody and comedy. As well as performing its function in this thesis, my categorisation should prove a useful tool for further research on musical comedy parody.

### 1.2.1 'Straight' musical comedy (generally) devoid of parodic elements

All the parody songs featured in this thesis belong under the broad umbrella of musical comedy. While some kinds of musical comedy involve parody, others do not. 'The Birthday Song', by the Canadian comedian Mae Martin, is devoid of parody, although it includes a brief moment of pastiche in its reference to the Black Eyed Peas hit 'I've Got a Feeling'.[13] The song lasts around two minutes and features Martin on guitar and vocals. Although the music plays a crucial role as a vehicle for comedy, the aesthetics are almost entirely driven by the

[11] Kirsten Zemke, '"I Told You I Was Freaky": Gender, Genre, and Parody in the Songs of Flight of the Conchords', in Giuffre and Hayward, *Music in Comedy Television,* 117–28; Spirou, 'The Lonely Island's "SNL Digital Short"'.
[12] See, for example, Amber Day, *Satire and Dissent: Interventions in Contemporary Political Debate* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011); Jonathan Gray, Jeffrey P. Jones, and Ethan Thompson, eds., *Satire TV: Politics and Comedy in the Post-Network Era* (New York: New York University Press, 2009); and Lisa Colletta, 'Political Satire and Postmodern Irony in the Age of Stephen Colbert and Jon Stewart', *Journal of Popular Culture* 42, no. 5 (2009): 856–74.
[13] ComComedy, *'The Birthday Song' - Funny Musical Comedy by Mae Martin*, accessed 6 October 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jQRh3L_qYFM.

lyrics. The self-deprecating, observational lyrics about a miserable birthday are set to music in a straightforward speech-song style. The music does not deliberately imitate any particular style or genre, and the melody, harmony, and structure are simple. Unobtrusive guitar chords provide a minimalist accompaniment. The phrases expand as necessary (for example, a few additional bars are added to a verse) to accommodate varying sentence lengths, and Martin controls the use of rubato and pauses to enhance the comedy of the lyrics. Unlike many pop parodies, 'The Birthday Song' does not attempt to sound like a pop song which might feature in the charts. In her musical style Martin continues a tradition of musical comedians such as Monty Python, Flanders and Swann, and Tom Lehrer. In this tradition, humour is effected by the disjunction between the simple (almost naïve), jolly music on the one hand, and lyrics—which are often cynical or satirical, containing adult themes and language—on the other. Such comedy songs—such as, for example, Monty Python's 'Always Look on the Bright Side of Life'—are usually in a major key, with simple chords, an upbeat melody that is easy to sing along to, and lyrics foregrounded. The songs are most often structurally simple. Lehrer particularly utilises this disjunction, pairing lyrics of biting political and social satire with upbeat, perky music. In a live performance of 'Poisoning Pigeons in the Park', a lively oom-pah-pah waltz accompanies the lyrics 'When they see us coming/The birdies all try and hide/But they still go for peanuts/When coated with cyanide', which Lehrer delivers with an unsettling grin.[14] This disjunction between the tone of the music and lyrics respectively is also apparent in Martin's 'Birthday Song'.

Other comedians who produce simple, whimsical songs as vehicles for their jokes include DeAnne Smith and Sarah Silverman.[15] Martin, Smith, and Silverman are primarily stand-up comedians who occasionally use music to enhance their routines; most of their comedy is delivered through spoken stand-up. Sometimes, a comedian's performance is dominated by music. For the Australian performer Tim Minchin, music is the glue that holds his comedy routine together, rather than constituting a bonus addition to his stand-up set. Like Lehrer before him, Minchin uses musical virtuosity to enhance the live entertainment. Minchin demonstrates particular proficiency in jazz piano, and his songs are often lengthier and more structurally complex than, for example, 'Always Look on the Bright Side of Life'.[16] Although the categories are porous, we can nevertheless tentatively suggest a distinction between comedians who sometimes dabble in music in their stand-up routines (such as Martin), and 'musical comedians' for whom music is always an integral part of the humorous entertainment (such as Minchin).

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[14] The Tom Lehrer Wisdom Channel, *Tom Lehrer - Poisoning Pigeons In The Park*, accessed 6 October 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yhuMLpdnOjY.
[15] See Just For Laughs, *DeAnne Smith - No Worries*, accessed 6 October 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZcccjXgchhg&t=6s; Sarah Silverman, *Diva - Sarah Silverman*, accessed 6 October 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1bZfzscQMjU.
[16] See for example Minchin's satirical song 'Prejudice'. Tim Minchin, *Prejudice by Tim Minchin*, 2010, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KVN_0qvuhhw.

### 1.2.2 Musical comedy with parodic elements

It is not uncommon for musical comedians to produce both parodic and 'straight' comedy songs. Rachel Parris and Da Vinci's Notebook, whose work is discussed later in this section, are two examples of this. Sometimes, however, parodic and non-parodic comedic elements co-exist together in one song, thus making it difficult to definitively categorise an individual song as parody or non-parody. Bill Bailey's 'Texting Song' does not imitate a specific style or genre, and thus is not a straightforward parody song. It is a comedy song that can be interpreted as including parodic elements in both the music and lyrics.[17] The spoof song humorously critiques what Bailey perceives to be the empty banality of modern-day mainstream pop. Before performing the song in his stand-up routine, Bailey remarks that 'there's more evil in the charts than an Al-Qaeda suggestion box … They're not singing about anything really, they're not plumbing the depths of human experience'. This initial reference to mainstream pop as the explicit target of critique sets an expectation for an element of parody to be included in the song: that Bailey will critique the thing by doing the thing. 'Texting Song's satirical lyrics describe a brief romantic relationship conducted mainly via text. The music sounds like it was composed in a deliberately lazy fashion, exaggerating the perceived banality of much sincere pop music. Its structural simplicity is typical for comedy songs and mainstream chart hits alike. The melody conveys the most striking suggestion of laziness: it is largely static, revolves mostly round a single repeated note, and performed in a speech-song style. In contrast to 'straight' comedy songs, including Martin's 'Birthday Song' and other songs in Bailey's oeuvre, the parodic element in the music of 'Texting Song' suggests an exaggerated imitation of the banality of mainstream pop. Although the parodic aspect is not strong enough to justify categorising the song as a 'parody song'—Bailey's song still sounds far from any music heard in the charts—it can nevertheless be categorised as a comedy song with parodic elements.

A further kind of comedy song with parodic elements is that which imitates an existing pop song, yet rather than changing the lyrics or formal musical aspects, it changes or exaggerates aspects of the vocal delivery, often in a humorous manner. 'Stalker Medley' by the UK-based musical comedy duo Frisky & Mannish (Laura Corcoran and Matthew Floyd Jones) is a mash-up of popular songs whose lyrics are intended as romantic, including 'Eternal Flame' and 'Some Enchanted Evening'.[18] Pop parodies and mash-ups are closely related in

[17] billbailey, *Bill Bailey - Texting Song - Part Troll*, 2011, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vb_W7aMUu5I.
[18] Frisky & Mannish, *FRISKY & MANNISH - Stalker Medley - Live Performance*, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WESu1bbMR9k. 'Stalker Melody' is excerpted from 'Frisky and Mannish's School of Pop' 2013 live show.

their critical and often humorous reinterpretation of existing pop tracks.[19] Frisky & Mannish retain the original lyrics, melody, harmony, and basic rhythm of the songs. They alter the vocal delivery, tempo, style of accompaniment, and visual performative gestures to humorously draw attention to the sinister implications of lyrics such as 'I watch you when you are sleeping' and 'some enchanted evening you may see a stranger across a crowded room'. Here, the comedy depends on performative elements such as the timing of pauses, modification of vocal delivery, and body language. Specific aspects of original songs are exaggerated or altered in order to change the audience's perception of the lyrics, which don't necessarily sound creepy or jarring in the context of the original song.

Sometimes the parodic element of Frisky & Mannish's comedy is conveyed through exaggerated imitation of a particular artist's vocal style.[20] Musical impressions by comedians and musicians have gained particular popularity on American late-night talk shows such as *The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon.* The show features a regular segment—'Wheel of Musical Impressions'—in which Fallon and his guest imitate the facial expressions, gestures, vocal style, and timbre of distinctive pop artists.[21] Musical impressions constitute brief gestures of parody which are often non-satirical: the light-hearted mockery of the original artist does not necessarily contain a critical edge. These examples demonstrate that the distinction between 'straight' comedy songs and parody songs is not always clear. Needless to say, such categorisation inevitably depends upon the interpretation of each individual listener. A song that is labelled 'parody' by one listener might be regarded simply as 'comedy' by another listener.

### 1.2.3 Type A parody: videos that retain the music of the targeted song, changing only the lyrics and/or visuals

So far I have discussed the distinction between musical comedy which is parodic and that which is not. Now our discussion moves to focus only on songs which are clearly parodic. Within the broad category of musical parody, we can distinguish between songs that use music as a vehicle for lyrics that poke fun at a specific aspect of culture or politics from those that use music to poke fun at musical aesthetics. I label the former 'Type A' parodies, and the latter 'Type B'. Type A parodies often recycle the music of a specific targeted song, while

[19] On the structure and humour of mash-ups, see Ragnhild Brøvig-Hanssen and Paul Harkins, 'Contextual Incongruity and Musical Congruity: The Aesthetics and Humour of Mash-Ups', *Popular Music* 31, no. 1 (January 2012): 87–104.
[20] For example, 41 minutes into the 'School of Pop' show, Floyd Jones sings a Lilly Allen song in the style of Noel Coward, while Corcoran sings a Noel Coward song in the style of Lilly Allen. Frisky & Mannish, *FRISKY & MANNISH - School of Pop - Full Show*, 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dqjQrwVS0e4.
[21] See for example The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon, *Wheel of Musical Impressions with Ariana Grande*, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ss9ygQqqL2Q. The singer Christina Bianco gained popularity from a viral YouTube clip of her performing 'Total Eclipse of the Heart' in the style of several famous and distinctive singers. Christina Bianco, *Christina Bianco Diva Impressions 'Total Eclipse Of The Heart' (as Adele & More!) | Christina Bianco*, 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C3DlDPeurRw.

altering the lyrics, visuals, and/or another aspect of the original. These are much more common than Type B parodies, for which original music must be composed. The examples that follow demonstrate that the line between these respective parodic types is not always concrete, and that Type B parodies often combine a critique of politics or culture with poking fun at musical aesthetics.[22] It is also important to note that even in Type A parodies, where the music is used primarily as a container for the lyrics, the music is never purely incidental: it always adds a comedic punch to the song. Before returning to Type B parodies—which are the main focus of this thesis—I will first outline several kinds of Type A parodies.

Boxman-Shabtai focuses her research on YouTube pop parodies that recycle the music of an original song but change the lyrics and visuals of the video. She notes that in the second decade of the twenty-first century, these kinds of parodies are now so common that they produce on average more revenue than the original songs they imitate.[23] Weird Al Yankovic is perhaps the most notorious practitioner of such parodies, having produced fourteen albums of parodies and mash-ups since 1983. Although Yankovic does not exactly replicate the music of the targeted songs, he creates backing tracks with an extremely close resemblance to the original. In his parody of Michael Jackson's 'Beat It' (which Yankovic changes to 'Eat It') the lyrics constitute the only obvious difference between the two audio tracks.[24] The harmony, melody, rhythm, and basic instrumentation remain constant for each song. Though the respective tracks have different key signatures and slight differences in tempo and instrumental timbre, these changes are not clearly apparent to the casual listener: unless the listener has perfect pitch, or they listen to the two tracks side-by-side, they are unlikely to notice that they parody is in a different key to the original. The alterations in tempo and instrumentation are so small that they are likewise unobvious to the listener. Enough musical elements thus remain constant to ensure that the music of the parody song is clearly identifiable as a copy of the original. Yankovic's lyrics, in contrast, are entirely altered to change the meaning of Jackson's song. 'Beat It' centres on gang violence:

> They told him don't you ever come around here
> Don't want to see your face, you better disappear
> The fire's in their eyes and their words are really clear
> So beat it, just beat it

'Eat It', meanwhile, is about a fussy eater:

[22] Bill Bailey's 'Texting Song' is an example of this.
[23] Boxman-Shabtai, 'The Practice of Parodying', 4.
[24] Michael Jackson, *Michael Jackson - Beat It (Official Video)*, 2011, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oRdxUFDoQe0; alyankovic, *'Weird Al' Yankovic - Eat It*, 2010, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZcJjMnHoIBI&list=PLBvdvKDIsQZnUIG5OVq2FLkhW_QWOcXOa.

How come you're always such a fussy young man?
Don't want no Captain Crunch, don't want no Raisin Bran
Well, don't you know that other kids are starving in Japan?
So eat it, just eat it

Here Yankovic copies Jackson's rhyming structure and—crucially—removes only a single letter from the titular phrase, so that 'beat it' becomes 'eat it'. Aside from these similarities, however, the lyrics are entirely different. The differences in the visuals of the video are also designed to stand out. While Yankovic imitates the visuals of Jackson's video, he humorously alters details throughout. In the fight scene, rather than fighting with knives (as in Jackson's original), the rival gang leaders use forks to fight over a chicken. Yankovic mimics Jackson's gestures and dance moves, while drawing attention to his own relative incompetence and lack of poise.

The obvious humour that drives the changes in the lyrics and video of 'Eat It' means that, in these aspects, the distance between the original and the parody is relatively wide. Crucially, these altered details are intended to be immediately noticeable to the audience. The small changes in the musical aesthetics, in contrast, are unlikely to be intended as recognisable. Although not impossible, it is unlikely that Yankovic's decision to change the key of the original song was prompted by an urge to create critical distance between the music of the original and that of the parody. It is more probable that the transposition was fuelled by a need to make the parody easier to sing: Jackson sings in a higher tessitura than Yankovic. None of the musical changes have a humorous or critical effect on the parody. In the case of this parody, the semantic shift is located only in the visuals of the video and the lyrics—not the musical aesthetics. Yankovic's 'Eat It', then, exemplifies a Type A parody, in which the musical aesthetics may alter slightly from the original, but not in a way that significantly affects the meaning of the parody. Type A parodies cannot constitute a critical commentary on musical aesthetics, since the music is not altered enough for this to be effective.

Aside from Yankovic, YouTube is full of other artists who primarily produce Type A parodies of mainstream pop songs: The Key of Awesome and Bart Baker are two of the most prolific producers of this kind of parody. Some of these songs demonstrate the fragility of the line between tongue-in-cheek cover songs and parody songs. Dave Days produces cover songs that generally retain most formal musical elements and lyrics of the original song, while changing the musical arrangement. The music is reproduced in Days' distinctive style of guitar-based punk pop.[25] While Days does not usually alter the lyrics in his cover songs, his parody of 'Stacey's Mom' changed the title lyrics to 'Chelsea's Mom', and made political

[25] See for example Days' cover of Cary Rae Jepsen's 'Call Me Maybe': Dave Days, *Call Me Maybe (Dave Days, Alex Goot, Chad Sugg)*, 2012, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AiS5JDO13fo. Days' new arrangements often use additional instruments compared to the original, and include virtuosic guitar solos.

references throughout the song in honour of Hillary Clinton during her presidential campaign.[26] The video uses actors to portray Hillary and her daughter Chelsea. For any given song, the line between cover and parody depends upon the extent to which the song's meaning changes. Such change can be effected either through the lyrics, visuals of the video, or musical aesthetics—or a combination of these. Measuring 'meaning' in a song is a notoriously difficult and elusive task. While answer to the question 'when does a cover song become a parody?' is beyond the remit of this thesis, a consideration of this problem is nevertheless a useful exercise. Needless to say, different listeners will draw different conclusions as to whether something should be labelled a cover song or a parody. In my definition of parody set out earlier in the chapter, I noted that the critical intent of parody songs can vary widely. 'Chelsea's Mom', then, is a parody with a weak level of satirical bite. The parody has a low level of critical intent, as the original song ('Stacey's Mom') is used as a vehicle for a light-hearted celebration of Hillary Clinton.

### 1.2.4 Pop parodies with new music that do not critically target the music of the parodied original

We can identify a further sub-category of Type A parody, albeit one which edges closer to Type B. The musical aesthetics of the parodies in this sub-category are substantially different to those of the original song, yet the parody is not intended as a satirical critique of the original's musical style. Instead, the parody uses specific pop genres or songs as vehicles to communicate a point about a separate aspect of culture. The parody songs featured in the television shows *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* and *Horrible Histories* use original music to imitate specific genres or artists. Rather than critiquing that genre or artist, however, the parody song uses the music as a humorous way to convey an unrelated cultural message. The children's educational television show *Horrible Histories* uses pop parody songs to teach children about historical events. The lyrics and video tell the story of the historical event, while the music imitates the style of a modern pop genre or artist. 'Charles II King of Bling' parodies Eminem in order to tell the story of King Charles II—but the song does not present a critique of Eminem or hip hop music.[27] The humour is effected through the cultural disjunction between the seventeenth-century setting of the story and twentieth-century pop music. In the musical sitcom *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend,* parody songs enhance—and sometimes drive—the narrative of the show. The songs' lyrics often communicate satirical observations on contemporary socio-political topics including gender and sexuality. 'Sexy Getting Ready Song' parodies early 2000s R&B and subversively critiques the double standard regarding grooming expectations

[26] Dave Days, *Chelsea's Mom (Hillary Clinton - Stacy's Mom Parody)*, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RRdyQjSHcJE.
[27] CBBC, *Horrible Histories Song - Charles II King of Bling - CBBC*, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FA5abHKvUBQ.

for women and men respectively.[28] In both 'Sexy Getting Ready Song' and 'Charles II King of Bling', while the specific musical genres are deliberately chosen in order to enhance the comedy and/or social message of the parody song, the musical aesthetics are not critiqued. These examples demonstrate the versatility of parody as a form, showing the range of cultural work which pop parody can do.

Like *Horrible Histories* and *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*, many of the parody songs featured in Flight of the Conchord's eponymous television show produce original music in imitation of a specific artist or genre, but not necessarily in a critique of that artist or genre. 'Inner City Pressure' parodies Pet Shop Boys' 1984 hit 'West End Girls'.[29] The Conchords replicate the aesthetic style of the Pet Shop Boys' music and video, as well as the lyrical themes of class tension and the struggle of inner-city life. The setting constitutes a key difference between the respective videos: while the original Pet Shop Boys video depicts London, The Conchords version is filmed in New York, thus creating a humorous parodic parallel between the situations of Bret and Jemaine in New York and the Pet Shop Boys in London. Like *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*, the parody song is here used to enhance the narrative of the television show.

The examples set out so far in this taxonomy show that almost every parody song is unique in terms of the specific use(s) to which it is put, the level of satirical bite which it conveys, the target that it chooses to critique, and the component parts of the parody through which the critique is communicated (the lyrics, visuals, or musical aesthetics). The types of parody song discussed above are all interesting subjects for research, though detailed investigation of these parodies is beyond the remit of the present thesis.

### 1.2.5 Type B parodies: songs with new music that critique the musical aesthetics of the original target

So far I have mainly discussed Type A parodies, where even when the music differs from that of the original, the musical aesthetics are not satirised. The main focus of this thesis, however, is Type B parodies, which critique the musical aesthetics of the targeted original song or genre. While the main case studies in chapters 2, 3, and 5 constitute Type B parodies, the thesis also draws on Type A parodies as secondary case studies, particularly in Chapter 3. While the various kinds of Type A parodies are widespread in contemporary culture, Type B parodies are much rarer. I was drawn to Type B parodies due to their potential for providing a richer source of musicological analysis, since they use musical aesthetics to critically comment on musical aesthetics. Type A parodies, in contrast, are more suited to sociological than musicological analysis, since they are not produced in order to critique music.

[28] K Studio, *(Song) Crazy Ex Girlfriend | The Sexy Getting Ready Song - Rebecca*, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AJmWuNKabtM.
[29] r8dkid, *Flight of the Conchords Ep2 Inner City Pressure*, 2007, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7wqfcwgT0Ds.

When I first stumbled upon Axis of Awesome's 'How to Write a Love Song' I was not familiar with Type B parodies. The song's clear satirisation of the aesthetics of mainstream pop, along with its explicit naming of those aesthetic devices, thus caught my attention. As I noted in the Introduction, at various points throughout the song the lyrics work alongside the music in naming the specific aesthetic formulae that are satirized, with lines such as 'The beat kicks in and then I sing a big more rhythmically/To make it sensual I sing it in a minor key'. I thus categorise the song as a 'textbook' parody, since it teaches the listener how to construct the lyrics and music of a boy band hit. A detailed account of how the song functions is presented in Chapter 5. 'How to Write a Love Song' prompted me to research other songs which similarly not only satirise aesthetic devices of pop music, but also self-reflexively comment on the fact that they are doing this. These include 'Title of the Song' by Da Vinci's Notebook and 'Pop Song' by Jon Lajoie, both of which parody boy band music. Lajoie's 'Radio Friendly Song' satirises mainstream chart hits heard on the radio without targeting a specific genre. These songs comprise the primary case studies in Chapter 5. The Conchords' 'Think About It' is not so explicit in its critique of mainstream pop, though it merits inclusion in the Type B category due to a part of the song which self-reflexively names the musical devices used in the song's interlude. These songs thus constitute the primary case studies around which the thesis is built. They are distinguished from other kinds of parody songs through two crucial features: a) they use original music, rather than reproducing the music of the parodied target; and b) they self-reflexively comment on the musical materials that they satirise. With the exception of 'Think About It', the main aim of these parodies is to poke fun at the materials (the musical aesthetics and lyrics, and in some cases the video) of the targeted music. In this way they stand apart from other parody songs that use original music (such as those featured in *Horrible Histories*), but whose aim is not to make fun of the music that is parodied. Why did I choose to focus on this kind of musical parody rather than other kinds? I am interested in musical aesthetics being used as a language of critique, and in songs that use (the aesthetics of) music to critique music. In the case of these parodies, the musical aesthetic language is the currency of satire. None of the main case studies in this thesis have ever been submitted to academic study.

I will briefly outline several further Type B parodies that are not submitted to detailed analysis in later chapters of the thesis, mainly due to limitations of space. The following songs, like the main case studies, all satirise mainstream pop aesthetics through their own original music, while self-reflexively naming the musical gestures they parody. Bo Burnham's 'Repeat Stuff' (2013) skewers the generic nature of both musical aesthetics and lyrics of contemporary mainstream love songs.[30] Burnham is strikingly severe on the apparently naïve audiences of such songs, invoking Nazi salutes and disdainfully lambasting the music industry for cashing

[30] boburnham, *Repeat Stuff. (Full Show on YouTube and Netflix)*, 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QCVGpvzcHko.

in on the insecurity of young girls. He draws attention to the banality of the music, noting that the song is composed of just four chords, and that the chorus material inanely repeats itself: 'I love the fact that you are dumb enough/To not realize everything I've said has been said before/In a thousand ways in a thousand songs, some with the same four chords'. In The Key of Awesome's 'Epic Pop Song Tutorial Ft. Everyone!' (2015) members of the parody group each portray a different mainstream pop star, including Pharrell, Avicii, Katy Perry, Taylor Swift, Justin Bieber, Beyonce, Ariana Grande, and Kanye West.[31] The song satirises the distinctive musical traits of each pop star in turn, self-reflexively naming component parts of mainstream pop songs as they are heard in the parody. For example, Pharrell sings 'First off, start with an 808 drum/pounding their brains into submission', while Kanye West adds 'Autotune is your best friend/It's been my jam since 2010/Now you can be the next pop king/Without ever learning to sing'.

The music and lyrics of 'Amazing' (2013), produced by the British musical comedian Rachel Parris, parody the ballads typically performed by winners of television talent contests like *Pop Idol* and *X Factor*.[32] The lyrics poke gentle fun at the self-indulgent motivational clichés used in ballads released by the winners of these competitions such as 'The Climb' by Joe McElderry and 'All This Time' by Michelle McManus. Parris's lyrics read:

> Sometimes the road can feel so long
> Sometimes the pain can feel so strong
> But when the road is long and the pain is strong look inside you
> When the path is rough cause you've had enough look inside you
> And see I'm amazing, I'm amazing
> If you're seeking inspiration look at me
> I'm amazing, I'm so awesome
> It's hard for some but not me

The music closely imitates the pop ballad, including the most notoriously cliched elements of the form: elevating modulation, backing chorus, melismatic singing, and slow tempo.[33] Kelly Damon, a South African musician who goes by the alias 'Rainbow Skychild', produced 'Every Pop Song Ever' in 2017.[34] The original music satirises banal electro-pop, while some of the lyrics self-reflexively name the musical devices used. Damon refers to the 'autotuned melody'; during the bridge, in which she claps her hands to the beat, she sings 'now we'll all clap like we're little kiddies'; in the token rap verse she points out that 'this isn't even rapping/it is just

[31] The Key of Awesome, *Epic Pop Song Tutorial Ft. Everyone! Key Of Awesome #98*, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=70yznk16kmw.
[32] Rachel Parris, *'Amazing' (Spoof X-Factor Winner's Song) | Rachel Parris*, 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8uauJri9OZc.
[33] The pop ballad style will be discussed in Chapter 4.
[34] Rainbow Skychild, *Every Pop Song Ever*, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j2VFu3hhMMo.

talking to the beat-beat/I sound like a car that's on the street-street'. The lyrics also target the contradictory messages often conveyed through a contemporary pop culture version of feminism, which encourage women—especially young female pop stars—to sexualise themselves in the name of empowerment: 'I take more clothes off to show that I am strong'. Finally, the Canadian pop-rock band Mariana's Trench produced a parody song entitled 'Pop 101' in 2014.[35] The song is a collage of different styles of mainstream pop, reflecting the stylistic hybridity of much chart music post-2010, and referencing artists in diverse genres, from Imogen Heap to Mumford and Sons. The lyrics sometimes reference the musical devices satirised: 'a minor chord tensions grow/fade in the bass like so'.

Limitations of space did not permit me to analyse all these Type B parodies with the same level of detail applied to the songs discussed in Chapters 2, 3, and 5. Since a significant proportion of these Type B mainstream pop parodies target boy band music, I chose to limit my investigation to these in order to narrow my focus for the main case studies. The Conchords' 'Think About It' fruitfully complements these case studies as it provides a way in to dissect issues of race and capitalism in pop parody. The range of examples of musical comedy and parody discussed in this taxonomy support several observations about pop parody that I highlight further on in the thesis. In particular, they allow me to make a preliminary observation regarding the gender of musical parodists. Although we can find several women producing pop parody, particularly since 2010—Laura Corcoran, Rachel Parris, Rachel Bloom, and Kelly Damon—the significantly higher proportion of men featured in the examples above suggests that pop parody remains a male-dominated form. The implications of this will be discussed in the Conclusion of the thesis.

## 1.3 Introduction to Mainstream and Manufactured Pop

The thesis is not only about parody songs, but also about the mainstream pop that is satirised. Chapter 4 focuses exclusively on boy band music, with no mention of parody. In the other chapters, the case studies prompt us to critique issues pertaining to the notions of 'mainstream' and 'manufactured', including authenticity, commercialism, race, and gender. The following section sets out some preliminary observations on mainstream and manufactured pop, thus contextualising the analysis in later chapters. In particular, I focus on how this music has been treated in the academy, noting that despite the recent trend for a 'poptimism' which accepts and even celebrates mainstream pop, the influence of rock ideology lingers enough to ensure that some of the formats perceived to be the most 'manufactured' (such as boy band music) are still largely overlooked, at least in terms of their aesthetics.

[35] Marianas Trench, *Marianas Trench - Pop 101 Ft. Anami Vice*, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4kpWkV7IBUw&t=106.

### 1.3.1 Mainstream Pop and the Academy

As popular music studies formed as a distinct academic discipline in the late 1970s and early 1980s, it tended to focus on 'unpopular popular' music at the expense of mainstream pop.[36] This trend continued for several decades, and was particularly acute in popular music analysis. Of over 140 titles published by the Ashgate Popular and Folk Music Series, only a scant few focus on mainstream pop. Most of the volumes which do—*Adapting Idols: Authenticity, Identity and Performance in a Global Television Format* (2012), *Pop Idols and Pirates: Mechanisms of Consumption and the Global Circulation of Popular Music* (2008), and *A Song for Europe: Popular Music and Politics in the Eurovision Song Contest* (2007)—approach mainstream pop from a strictly sociological perspective, rather than focusing on the sound of the music as the primary object of study.[37] Only two volumes—*Song Interpretation in 21st-Century Pop Music* (2015) and *She's so Fine: Reflections on Whiteness, Femininity, Adolescence and Class in 1960s Music* (2011)—includes music analysis of mainstream pop.[38] As a point of comparison, twelve volumes in the series focus on the musical aesthetics of specific subcultures including British rock modernism, punk, heavy metal, and artists including Frank Zappa, Joni Mitchell, and Radiohead.[39] An investigation of all the issues of *Popular Music* (the central journal in popular music studies) since its inception in 1981 tells a similar story; research on mainstream and manufactured pop is significantly overshadowed by music that is less popular with the masses but is considered to have an important and enduring aesthetic, political, or cultural impact. When mainstream pop artists such as Michael Jackson, Madonna, Beyoncé, and Lady Gaga have been surveyed in the academy, they have tended to be assessed as cultural icons rather than as musicians. A recent edited volume on Lady Gaga devotes very little space to musical aesthetics—that is, how the music actually *sounds*—focusing instead on fashion, music videos, and performativity.[40]

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[36] Simon Frith, *Performing Rites: On the Value of Popular Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 19–20.
[37] Joost de Bruin and Koos Zwaan, eds., *Adapting Idols: Authenticity, Identity and Performance in a Global Television Format* (London: Routledge, 2012); Charles Fairchild, *Pop Idols and Pirates: Mechanisms of Consumption and the Global Circulation of Popular Music* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008); Ivan Raykoff and Robert Deam Tobin, eds., *A Song for Europe: Popular Music and Politics in the Eurovision Song Contest* (Aldershot, England; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2007).
[38] Ralf von Appen et al., eds., *Song Interpretation in 21st-Century Pop Music* (Farnham, Surrey; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2015); Stras, ed., *She's So Fine*.
[39] The twelve volumes are Barry J. Faulk, *British Rock Modernism, 1967-1977: The Story of Music Hall in Rock* (Farnham, Surrey; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2010); John Encarnacao, *Punk Aesthetics and New Folk: Way down the Old Plank Road* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2013); Gerd Bayer, *Heavy Metal Music in Britain* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2009); Paul Carr, ed., *Frank Zappa and the And* (Farnham, Surrey; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2013); Anne Karppinen, *The Songs of Joni Mitchell: Gender, Performance and Agency* (London: Routledge, 2016); Joseph Tate, ed., *The Music and Art of Radiohead* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005); Ron Moy, *Kate Bush and Hounds of Love* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007); Michael Goddard and Benjamin Halligan, eds., *Mark E. Smith and the Fall: Art, Music and Politics* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010); Sophy Smith, *Hip-Hop Turntablism, Creativity and Collaboration* (Farnham, Surrey; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2013); George Plasketes, *Please Allow Me to Introduce Myself: Essays on Debut Albums* (Farnham, Surrey; Burlington, VT, USA: Ashgate, 2013); Allan F. Moore, *Rock, the Primary Text: Developing a Musicology of Rock* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2001); Peter Dowdall, *Technology and the Stylistic Evolution of the Jazz Bass* (Abingdon, Oxon; New York, NY: Routledge, 2017).
[40] Martin Iddon and Melanie L. Marshall, eds., *Lady Gaga and Popular Music: Performing Gender, Fashion, and Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2014).

Mainstream and manufactured pop, then, have been particularly overlooked in popular music analysis, a disciplinary strand which has historically focused on the aesthetics of 'exceptional' as opposed to 'ordinary' music—that which pushes stylistic boundaries outwards and away from the central 'main stream' of musical style. It might be assumed that there is no need to devote aesthetic analysis to music which represents the status quo, whose styles are overly familiar and intelligible to most listeners and scholars. Mainstream music has rarely been aestheticised in the way that specific genres and oppositional subcultures often are.

It is not difficult to understand why, in its early days, popular music studies shied away from mainstream pop. At its inception in the late 1970s and for several decades following, the discipline faced a general anti-pop sentiment from the wider academy, in which—thanks in part to Adorno's legacy—pop was perceived as aesthetically regressive and banal, and thus unworthy of scholarly attention.[41] Adorno is widely regarded as having dismissed all popular music as a product wholly complicit with the ideology of the culture industry. His writings in the 1930s and 40s characterise popular music as infinitely marketable, standardised, and to blame for the 'regression of listening' that he observed in audiences under late capitalism.[42] While it must be remembered that Adorno's experience of popular music was specific to this era (it is presumed that his main target was the dance-hall music of the first half of the century), nevertheless, he never took the trouble to update his critique, despite popular music's development through the mid-twentieth century to encompass many varied forms, some of which are very far removed from this early model of pop. Even Adorno's most sympathetic critics have observed his unrelenting bias in this area.[43] It is little wonder, then, that pop scholars chose to study music that they thought was more likely to counter than to reinforce such stereotypes. In order to be taken seriously within musicology, it was necessary to demonstrate pop's aesthetic validity—and in order to be taken seriously in other disciplines such as cultural studies, it was necessary to demonstrate its cultural validity. Stan Hawkins explains,

> Even withstanding the expansion of critical approaches in the 1970s, which paved the way forward to the emergence of new musicological discourses by the late 1980s, musicologists engaged in popular music research have continued to feel some sense of isolation from the mainstream for obvious reasons. The implications of consumerism, commercialism, trend and

[41] For a comprehensive history of popular music studies, including a discussion of the main disciplinary threads which comprise the field, see David Hesmondhalgh and Keith Negus, eds., *Popular Music Studies* (London: Arnold, 2002), 3–7.
[42] Adorno, 'On Popular Music'; 'On Jazz'; 'On the Fetish-Character in Music and the Regression of Listening'; 'On the Social Situation of Music'.
[43] For accounts of popular music scholars' objections to Adorno's writings on pop, see Max Paddison, 'The Critique Criticised: Adorno and Popular Music', *Popular Music* 2 (January 1982); Adorno, *Essays on Music*.

> hype, with the vigorous endorsement of modernist ideologies, have repeatedly curtailed any serious opportunity for studying popular music in Western music institutions.[44]

Popular music studies distanced itself from mainstream pop, as scholars instead analysed popular music which they considered to be aesthetically innovative as well as politically or culturally revolutionary—and which, presumably, they preferred to listen to. It was just too difficult, it seemed, to defend groups such as the Backstreet Boys against Adorno's accusations of standardisation, fragmentation and regression, so most popular music scholars did not attempt to do so. As Adam Krims observes,

> Just about nobody, most likely, would want to contend that Adorno was completely wrong. Who could resist an Adornan vision of the seemingly endless worldwide proliferation of young-boy pop/r&b groups? Or who could have expected that the Backstreet Boys would come to look so good, next to the endless stream of even less interesting knock-offs? Clearly, Adorno was not wrong about everything.[45]

Andy Bennet notes that rock journalism's 'critical distinction between rock (intelligent—authentic) and pop (unintelligent—commercially orientated)' heavily influenced popular music studies during its early years'.[46] This valorising of rock over pop became known as 'rock ideology', which, as Katherine Meizel explains, 'privileges particular ideations of authenticity as intrinsic to rock while positioning pop musicians as artistically inconsequential, false, and excessively focused on salesmanship'.[47] Rock ideology was originally rooted in rock music of the 1960s and 70s, as the music that first constituted the ideological 'other' to mainstream pop. Nowadays, however, 'rock ideology' functions in conjunction with numerous other 'alternative' popular genres, including punk, techno, hip hop, and metal, to name but a few. It encompasses so many different kinds of popular music, in fact, that its counterpart, 'pop', is used to refer to any music that does not belong to a specific genre of popular music. As Meizel, following Frith, points out, 'pop is tricky to define: it does not so much comprise a particular style of music as an assemblage of whatever remains when the other genres have been identified'.[48] Pop music can thus be considered an empty signifier: it doesn't so much define itself as constitute a blank canvas against which other genres are defined.

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[44] Stan Hawkins, 'Perspectives in Popular Musicology: Music, Lennox, and Meaning in 1990s Pop', *Popular Music* 15, no. 1 (January 1996): 17.
[45] Adam Krims, 'Marxist Music Analysis Without Adorno: Popular Music and Urban Geography' in Allan F. Moore, ed., *Analyzing Popular Music* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 132.
[46] Bennett, 'Cheesy Listening: Popular Music and Ironic Listening Practices', in Baker, Bennett, and Taylor, eds., *Redefining Mainstream Popular Music* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 204–5.
[47] Katherine Meizel, *Idolized: Music, Media, and Identity in American Idol* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 2011), 52.
[48] Meizel, 52.

The dominance of rock ideology in the first few decades of popular music studies is clear from several volumes of popular music analysis which focus on 'rock' rather than pop music.[49] The 1997 edited volume *Understanding Rock: Essays in Musical Analysis* interprets the category of 'rock' broadly, including music by artists as diverse as k.d. lang, Jimi Hendrix and Paul Simon. Its use of 'rock' in the title, then, seems a deliberate attempt to distance this music from pop. Despite this, one of the chapters is devoted to the 1960s band The Beach Boys, whose aura of fun-loving innocence and sounds evoking California's relaxed vibe of sun and surf might usually preclude consideration of their music as 'serious'.[50] The chapter, however, entitled 'After Sundown: The Beach Boys' Experimental Music', indicates that the band are permitted inclusion in a volume on rock music on the basis that only their 'experimental' output is analysed, as opposed to the band's more commercially successful and familiar music.

In recent years, popular music studies' historic tendency to focus on 'alternative' genres at the expense of mainstream pop has been submitted to increasing criticism. In an article on the commercially successful artist Annie Lennox, Stan Hawkins notes that 'scholars of popular music in the 1990s are increasingly aware that traditional musicology has failed to recognise commercial pop music as a legitimate academic area of study'.[51] Chris Washburne and Maiken Derno, who edited the collection of essays entitled *Bad Music: The Music We Love to Hate*, explained that

> the seed for this book emerged during a discussion […] concerning the discrepancy between the music addressed in the scholarly literature and what most people in this world actually listen to. With only few exceptions, scholars tend to focus on music that has special value in terms of influence, competence, and historical genealogy all the while avoiding the mundane music of the everyday.[52]

Referring to 'manufactured pop', Allan Moore has noted that 'the almost total lack of research in this area is unsustainable'.[53] In the last decade or so popular music studies, along with music journalism, has moved away from rock ideology to instead embrace a 'poptimist' outlook which takes mainstream pop seriously. The diversification of the discipline, and especially the increasing inclusion of female and feminist voices, has helped to create an

[49] See, for example, John Rudolph Covach and Graeme M. Boone, eds., *Understanding Rock: Essays in Musical Analysis* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); Robert Walser, *Running with the Devil: Power, Gender, and Madness in Heavy Metal Music* (Hannover, NH: University Press of New England, 1993); Theodore Gracyk, *Rhythm and Noise: An Aesthetics of Rock* (Durham, N.C.; London: Duke University Press, 1996).
[50] Daniel Harrison, 'After Sundown: The Beach Boys' Experimental Music', in Covach and Boone, *Understanding Rock*, 33–57.
[51] Hawkins, 'Perspectives in Popular Musicology', 17.
[52] Washburne and Derno, eds., *Bad Music: The Music We Love to Hate*, ix.
[53] Allan Moore, 'Authenticity as Authentication', *Popular Music* 21, no. 2 (2002): 220, note 16.

environment in which this can happen. Notable contributions towards the reconfiguring of mainstream pop in popular music studies include Weisbard's *Top 40 Democracy*, which unabashedly celebrates mainstream music, and the edited volume *Redefining Mainstream Popular Music.*[54] The last decade has seen the emergence of a body of work which considers the aesthetics of popular music, including Laurie Stras's edited volume on girl groups in 1960s pop; Stephen Graham's analysis of Justin Timberlake's solo music; and David Metzer's study of the popular ballad. [55] In addition to this, further extant literature on boy bands will be discussed in Chapter 4, while Chapter 2 explores research on Motown, which is sometimes considered to constitute the 'manufactured pop' of the 1960s and 70s. Although this thesis does not fully subscribe to poptimism, it nevertheless constitutes part of the trend for increasing research on mainstream and manufactured pop.

### 1.3.2 Defining the Mainstream

How is mainstream music to be defined? Popular music studies' historical bias towards subcultures means that for many years the mainstream was almost always been defined negatively: in terms of what it is not rather than what it is.[56] It stands, monolithic, as an invisible measuring stick against which seemingly all else is both defined and valorised, particularly stylistic experimentation and political radicalism.[57] One might be forgiven for assuming that the musical mainstream is not in need of definition or explanation, since the dominant or prevailing taste is likely to be familiar to all. Huber observed that 'mainstream' is a commonsensical term, and Donald Tovey stated that 'the main stream of music is what we think we all know'.[58] While every person might have an idea of what constitutes mainstream popular music, it is unlikely that each listener's conceptions of 'mainstream' will align with each other. Indeed, there is no clear scholarly consensus either on how the mainstream should be approached as a concept, or on the sonic characteristics of the mainstream. As rock ideology has been gradually dismantled, however, popular music studies has taken steps towards asserting a positive definition of mainstream. Weisbard's

[54] Eric Weisbard, *Top 40 Democracy: The Rival Mainstreams of American Music.* (Chicago; London: The University of Chicago Press, 2014); Baker, Bennett, and Taylor, eds., *Redefining Mainstream Popular Music.*
[55] Stras, *She's so Fine;* Stephen Graham, 'Justin Timberlake's Two-Part Complementary Forms: Groove, Extension, and Maturity in Twenty-First-Century Popular Music', *American Music* 32, no. 4 (2014): 448–474; David Metzer, *The Ballad in American Popular Music: From Elvis to Beyoncé* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017). See also Griffiths, 'Elevating Form and Elevating Modulation'; Don Traut, '"Simply Irresistible": Recurring Accent Patterns as Hooks in Mainstream 1980s Music', *Popular Music* 24, no. 1 (January 2005): 57–77; and Stephen Graham, '*The X Factor* and Reality Television: Beyond Good and Evil', *Popular Music* 36, no. 1 (2017): 6–20.
[56] Sarah Baker, Andy Bennett, and Jodie Taylor define subcultural capital as 'a kind of cultural asset accumulated by situating oneself as subcultural in opposition to an imagined monolithic mainstream'. 'Preface', in Taylor, Baker, and Bennett, *Redefining Mainstream Popular Music*, ix. On subcultures and subcultural capital, see also Sarah Thornton, *Club Cultures: Music, Media, and Subcultural Capital* (Cambridge, U.K.: Polity, 1995).
[57] The implication is that 'this other music is good because it does this (be it experimentation in form or harmony, or lyrics that evoke a radical political sentiment), while the mainstream is bad because it fails to do this'.
[58] Alison Huber, 'Mainstream as Metaphor: Imagining Dominant Culture', in *Redefining Mainstream Popular Music*, ed. Baker, Bennett, and Taylor; Donald Tovey (1938), quoted in idem., 9.

book *Top 40 Democracy* pushes back against the focus on rock narratives which have dominated popular music studies, instead charting the history of mainstream music through an exploration of radio formats in North America such as Top 40, Adult Contemporary, and Middle of the Road.[59] Toynbee configures 'mainstream(ing)' as a process, constructing a new definition of mainstream which is positive in two senses: it is not necessarily a pejorative descriptor, and it defines mainstream by what it *is*, rather than what it is not.[60] It is perhaps more difficult to pin down the meaning of 'mainstream' in terms of musical style. Several genres have been associated with the mainstream; teenybop is the one most relevant to this thesis.

On an ontological level, 'mainstream' operates on a different plane from other musical genres because, even though most of us have an idea of what mainstream pop sounds like, the term itself it does not provide any indicators as to the music's stylistic characteristics or cultural origins. The names of musical categories—such as R&B, house, techno, or country—offer clues as to where the music comes from and what it sounds like. In contrast, I have already intimated that 'pop' (which we could replace with 'mainstream popular music') is the music that is left over when all other genres have been accounted for.

The music that is targeted in the parodies analysed in Chapter 5 can be considered the epitome of mainstream due to their lack of a strong connection to any particular niche genre. This is the kind of pop music that is often considered to be the most unapologetically mainstream, and which, whenever a more specific title than 'mainstream' is required, is variously referred to as 'manufactured', 'bubblegum', or 'plastic' pop.[61] We can suggest that the music which is the most mainstream of all is that which has no corresponding underground or alternative scene. While there exists a vaguely-defined alternative genre of 'experimental pop', there is no real underground or alternative counterpart to the boy band, to the artists whose careers are launched by television shows such as *X Factor*, or to the collection of manufactured pop acts formed by management teams in the 1990s and early 2000s who were marketed primarily towards teenagers (such as S Club 7, Steps or the Spice Girls).[62] There is no such thing as 'alternative bubblegum pop'; neither are there specialist teenybop or bubblegum charts.[63] Although it would be misleading to consider 'mainstream' a discrete genre, bubblegum pop comes close to a quintessential mainstream genre.

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[59] Weisbard, *Top 40 Democracy*.
[60] Jason Toynbee, 'Mainstreaming, from Hegemonic Centre to Global Networks', in *Popular Music Studies*, ed. David Hesmondhalgh and Keith Negus (London: Arnold, 2002), 149–63.
[61] On bubblegum pop, see Nick Brownlee, *Bubblegum: The History of Plastic Pop* (London: Sanctuary, 2003); Kim Cooper, David Smay, and Jake Austen, *Bubblegum Music Is the Naked Truth* (Los Angeles: Feral House, 2001).
[62] 'Experimental pop' takes the basic aesthetic signifiers of pop and morphs them in ways that are unprecedented for chart pop music. For example, this music will often keep the upbeat, catchy hooks and lively rhythms, but may experiment with unusual timbres and textures. Examples of experimental pop artists include Animal Collective, Micachu and the Shapes, and Liss.
[63] It is worth noting, however, that there exists a Billboard Adult Contemporary chart.

### 1.3.3 Defining Manufactured Pop

Although 'manufactured pop' is a term used freely by journalists and scholars, it is probably not favoured by fans to describe the music they enjoy. When the label of 'manufactured pop' is used in critical discourse about music, its purpose is most often to convey a negative value judgement regarding the music's perceived inauthenticity. In general, the term only ever appears in passing in popular music scholarship; the precise meaning of 'manufactured' is rarely examined. Su Holmes refers to television talent contests like *Pop Idol* as 'the epitome of manufactured pop'. Allan Moore connects the term with teenybop music aimed at young girls: 'no scholars with children can have failed to observe the crucial impact on their self-authentication of that conventionally most inauthentic music, that of unashamedly "manufactured" pop. Within my own daughter's peer group it is still S Club 7's 'Bring It All Back' that most clearly performs this function'.[64] S Club 7 were formed in 1998 by Simon Fuller's 19 Entertainment company, one of the pop powerhouses of the 1990s and early 2000s which also created the Spice Girls and *Pop Idol*. 'Manufactured pop' is also used to describe music from earlier decades, perhaps most notably the 1960s band the Monkees, who, in a similar fashion to S Club 7, were formed for a fictional television series that centred on the antics of the band.[65] The idea of manufactured music is also often associated with Tin Pan Alley: as Keir Keightley notes, 'for roughly the first half of the twentieth century, Tin Pan Alley was a key site for what Simon Frith has called "the industrialisation of popular music," the systematic creation and circulation of music made for profit'.[66] 'Manufactured' is often used synonymously with 'bubblegum pop', a genre which is best represented by the most popular song of 1969, 'Sugar Sugar', released by a group of fictional cartoon characters known as The Archies. Rebecca Black's 'Friday' is also commonly held up as an example of manufactured pop. In 2010, the music production company 'ARK Music Factory' was employed by Black's mother to produce a song and video as a gift for her daughter. Keightley observes that the 'much mocked song was the output of a vanity-recording service, a "music factory" whose product was derided by many as formulaic, artless or shoddy. Created to simulate musical stardom for one privileged teenager, "Friday" arguably only became a hit because of widespread amusement at the ineptness of the finished product and its "boilerplate pop lyrics."'[67] Finally, perhaps the clearest example of 'manufactured' pop since the new millennium is the rise of reality television talent contests such as *Popstars*, *Pop Idol*, *Fame*

[64] Moore, 'Authenticity as Authentication', 220.
[65] See Carl Rhodes and Robert Westwood, *Critical Representations of Work and Organization in Popular Culture* (London; New York: Routledge, 2007), 157. The sitcom-style television shows with the Monkees and S Club 7 demonstrate the precedent for manufactured pop to exploit diverse methods of distribution in order to maximise revenue gains. Both S Club 7 and the Spice Girls also starred in feature films, *Seeing Double* and *Spice World* respectively.
[66] Keir Keightley, 'Grinding out Hits at the Song Factory', in *The SAGE Handbook of Popular Music*, ed. Andy Bennett and Steve Waksman (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2015), 174.
[67] Keightley, 173.

*Academy* and *The X Factor*, which document the transformation of ordinary members of the public into expertly manufactured pop stars through the format of a singing competition.[68] Brett Lashua observes that 'the "*Pop Idol* phenomenon" epitomised by *X Factor* arguably represents the penultimate music production line, churning out musical ready-mades on an annual basis, powered by a massive marketing machine that ostensibly involves viewers' participatory votes, while garnering millions in revenues for the corporations and music moguls behind the artists'.[69] This development in the pop music industry signifies an intensified and accelerated version of the culture industry as theorised by Adorno and Horkheimer, by which so-called 'mass culture' is produced and distributed by industry bosses for the consumption of the masses in order to make a profit.

The above examples demonstrate the kind of music that is commonly associated with the 'manufactured pop' label. These examples all project clear overtones of commerciality. Until very recently, the negative correlation between commerciality and authenticity was taken for granted in popular music studies and music criticism. As Elizabeth Eva Leach notes, 'although in musical terms the markers for authenticity change in their detail depending on the types of music being set within the terms of the opposition, the fundamental implication remains the same—the authentic music is more real because it is less designed as a commercial venture'.[70] Leach is not alone in observing that discourse surrounding authenticity in music depends on romantic notions of authorship, originality, the artist being 'true to oneself', and the music expressing the artist's inner truth. In contrast, music that is considered to be especially commercialised is subject to pressure to conform to the dictates of the music industry, which are in turn shaped by market interests and adherence to consumer tastes. Manufactured pop is still often seen as the worst offender in this regard.

This chapter has not yet addressed the elephant in the room in discourse on manufactured pop, which is the music's implicit gendering as feminine. The sickly sweet taste and pastel hues of pink and blue that are conjured in the imagination when one thinks of bubblegum pop are clearly associated with girlhood, while lyrics referring to 'sugar', 'honey', and 'candy girl' carry sexual overtones which are highly gendered. Sarah Baker suggests that Top 40 teenybop music marketed to girls is the 'most mainstream' of all popular music, observing, 'what I find interesting is the place pre- and early-teen girls hold within the structure of the music industry—they are the target market of a hyper-commodified type of 'pop' but are then

[68] The Idols franchise has been adapted by numerous regions around the world and is broadcast in 150 countries. Versions include Pop Idol in the UK, American Idol in the US and Deutschland Sucht den Superstar in Germany. See de Bruin and Zwaan, *Adapting Idols*.
[69] Brett Lashua, 'Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea: Music and Leisure in an Era of *X Factor* and Digital Pirates', in *The New Politics of Leisure and Pleasure*, ed. Peter Bramham and Stephen Wagg (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 226.
[70] Elizabeth Eva Leach, 'Vicars of Wannabe: Authenticity and the Spice Girls', *Popular Music* 20, no. 2 (2001): 143.

routinely derided for consuming this same music.[71] Baker notes the implicit sexism in discourse surrounding teenybop music, which implies that girls are passive and easily manipulated by the culture industry. The misogynist attitudes attached specifically to boyband fandom will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 4. In the present chapter, I note that biases concerning youth and gender combine to create dismissive terms—teenybop and bubblegum pop—for the same music that, as Baker points out, might be referred to as 'Top 40' or 'chart pop' in the context of a different demographic. 'Bubblegum' suggests the music (and by implication, those who listen to it) is insubstantial and inconsequential, a fluffy distraction which, like the bubblegum sweet, serves little purpose other than passing the time.

Although the specific production processes sometimes set this music apart from other kinds of music, 'manufactured pop' is hardly ever just a neutral term used to describe such processes; it almost always carries negative connotations regarding the music's aesthetics. This is demonstrated when Girls Aloud's critical acclaim caused the group to be held up as an exception to the 'manufactured' reality pop format. The music journalist Peter Robinson openly professes his surprise that a group formed through this format could achieve such long-lasting critical and commercial success: 'Given Girls Aloud's unlikely origins, you could say it's a miracle they found their way to a 10th anniversary at all. Their reunion [ … ] sees them celebrating a decade at the top of pop, but who would have bet money on it when they first formed?'[72] A listener's labelling of some music as more 'manufactured' than other music often stems as much (if not more) from rock ideology bias than from concrete information about the music's mode of production. The term 'manufactured' primarily conveys information about a listener's perception of musical aesthetics, genre, and commercial popularity—and the relationship between these. While tangible differences in the production and distribution of some tracks compared with others is sometimes undeniable, nevertheless, 'manufactured' may not actually constitute a particularly helpful term in conveying the truth of these differences.

Keir Keightley is exceptional among scholars in investigating the origins and implications of the industrial metaphors used to describe popular music:

> Since the late nineteenth century, when the growing scale of the popular music business first began to be widely noticed, the rhetoric of 'grinding out' songs at a 'factory' has mixed industrial metaphors with aesthetic judgements. When we hear that Lil Wayne is 'grinding out' promotional videos, we understand that he is producing a large amount of material in a

[71] Sarah Baker, 'Teenybop and the Extraordinary Particularities of Mainstream Practice', in *Redefining Mainstream Popular Music,* ed. Baker, Bennett, and Taylor, 14–15.
[72] Peter Robinson, 'Girls Aloud: The Makings of a Pop Success Story', *The Guardian*, 19 October 2012, https://www.theguardian.com/music/2012/oct/19/girls-aloud-pop-success-story. See also Christoph Büscher, 'From "Popstars" To Pop Rebels — How Girls Aloud Manufactured Authenticity', *Medium*, 29 August 2017, https://medium.com/artmagazine/from-popstars-to-pop-rebels-how-girls-aloud-manufactured-authenticity-5873352fb238.

> concentrated time span, expending exceptional effort but also, perhaps, not investing the greatest care in creating these texts [ … ] Turns of phrase that deploy terms such as 'grinding' or 'factory' convey a particular perspective on the industrial mediation of music, one shaped by late nineteenth- and early twentieth century discussions of the music business.[73]

The term 'manufactured' is part of a wider trend of using analogies of industrial manufacturing processes to describe music—and, as Keightley notes, aesthetic value judgements are always implicated whenever such terms are used. He points out that the capitalist production-line analogy can never be an accurate way of describing musical production processes, because separate songs can never actually be mass-produced in the way that automobile parts or food packaging can.[74] Individual pop songs always differ from each other, no matter how slightly.

Although 'manufactured' may be a misleading and inadequate term to describe music, it would be unwise to throw the baby out with the bathwater and ignore the differences in the ways that different kinds of music are produced, distributed, and consumed. Recent decades have witnessed musicologists obsessively deconstruct the concept of authenticity to the point that it now almost ceases to have meaning at all. I noted in the Introduction that dominant consensus considers authenticity to be no more than a social construct, a discursive tool used to valorise certain kinds of music over others. While I do not necessarily wish to challenge this idea, I will observe that a determination to view authenticity as a discursive construct may have led to overlooking the truth that some music is produced within a different socio-economic structure than other kinds.[75] Popular music scholars' continued dismissal of 'manufactured' pop as a worthy object of study suggests that, despite the prevailing idea that authenticity is no more than a social construct, most scholars do in fact consider 'manufactured' pop to be less authentic than other kinds of popular music. As later chapters will show, there are often material socio-economic differences in the production and distribution of different kinds music. Whether we declare such material differences to be a sign of manufactured pop's inherent inauthenticity might be beside the point; what is important is that we acknowledge these differences.

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[73] Keightley, 'Grinding out Hits at the Song Factory', 173.
[74] Keightley, 185–86.
[75] Of course, on the broadest level, virtually all music produced today exists within the capitalist market, and so it can all be considered to be 'manufactured', to an extent. Considering this, we might ask whether manufactured pop's extreme commercial nature functions only at the level of discourse, or whether there is something in the aesthetics or economic structure of the music that renders its commodity status materially different to that of other kinds of music. Here we can contrast Frith's work with that of Adorno. While the former implies that relationships between various different kinds of music and the capitalist system differ only in terms of discourse, the latter contends that a material difference prevails, and that the economic structures of production and dissemination are transferred to the sound of the music itself. Adorno distinguishes between different kinds of music according to the extent to which they succeed in resisting their fate as commodities—but not only on a level of discourse.

This chapter has provided the reader with tools for understanding the subjects of this thesis: pop and parody, with the final section of the chapter detailing how the academy has approached mainstream and manufactured pop. While Chapter 4 builds on this in a discussion of discourse surrounding boy band music, Chapters 3, 4, and 5 foreground critiques of mainstream and manufactured pop from the perspectives of parody artists.

# CHAPTER 5

## THE ART OF THE BOY BAND PARODY

What do boy band parodies reveal about critical attitudes towards mainstream pop aesthetics? The final chapter in the thesis presents close readings of three Type B parody songs by musical comedy acts which target boy band music: 'Title of the Song' by Da Vinci's Notebook (released in 2000), 'How to Write a Love Song' by Axis of Awesome (2011), and 'Pop Song' by Jon Lajoie (2010). Each of these songs reveals something different about the workings of self-referential pop parody. The first two of these take a particular 'toolkit' form, with the lyrics self-reflexively naming the devices used in boy band songs which are simultaneously satirised in the music of the parody. 'Title of the Song' and 'How to Write a Love Song' present a humorous yet scathing critique of cliched gestures in boy band R&B. I explain how the musical aesthetics function as a vehicle for parody, through exaggeration of certain aesthetic devices from the original. The findings of Chapter 4 are thus useful in providing a framework for the aesthetics of boy band music, which I use to identify aspects of the parody songs that exaggerate these aesthetics. Some of the objects of parody, such as songs by the 1990s R&B boy band Boyz II Men, are investigated in detail. I consider the implications of Da Vinci's Notebook and Axis of Awesome specifically targeting Boyz II Men, concluding that this highlights uncomfortable racial dynamics at play both in boy band music and in parodies of black music by white artists, building on the findings of chapters 3 and 4.

The chapter also examines the multiple subject-positions occupied by the 'blue-eyed soul' artist Justin Timberlake, who is both an object of Axis of Awesome's parody song and a producer (with The Lonely Island) of his own R&B parody song: 'Dick in a Box'. I show how 'Dick in a Box', which is affectionate towards its target material, exemplifies a further function of pop parody, which is to cement an artist's insider status in a particular genre. By poking fun at 90s R&B, Timberlake legitimises his own position as a serious R&B artist in the 2000s.

Finally, Lajoie's 'Pop Song' and 'Radio Friendly Song' are analysed, demonstrating Lajoie's particularly scathing attitude towards his target. I argue that Lajoie's parody songs evade the binary of critical/uncritical music as theorised by Adorno and Paddison. The chapter as a whole thus presents examples of boy band parody with a range of critical stances, thus affirming Hutcheon's observation that parody's attitude can range from affectionate to ridiculing towards its original target.

## 5.1 'Toolkit' Parody Songs: Da Vinci's Notebook and Axis of Awesome

'Title of the Song' and 'How to Write a Love Song' present a clear critique of the perceived inauthenticity of boy band pop. The songs satirise the music, lyrics, and in one case the video, of boy band pop by humorously naming the formulaic devices used in the genre.[1] In 'Title of the Song' the comedy derives from the parodic critical distance expressed through the lyrics.[2] Rather than straightforwardly imitating the words of a typical boy band love ballad, the lyrics read like the instructions to a songwriting textbook, setting out a blank template for the construction of a song's text:

> Declaration of my feelings for you
> Elaboration on those feelings
> Description of how long these feelings have existed
> Belief that no one else could feel the same as I
>
> [ … ]
>
> Title of the song
> Naïve expression of love
> Reluctance to accept that you are gone
> Request to turn back time
> And rectify my wrongs
> Repetition of the title of the song

Here, Da Vinci's Notebook condense the lyrical tropes found in several boy band songs into a single template for writing such a song, thus drawing attention to the genre's reliance on formulae. At times, Axis of Awesome's 'How to Write a Love Song' also functions like a songwriting textbook, narrating the construction of the lyrics:[3]

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[1] Da Vinci's Notebook was an American a cappella comedy singing group with members Bernie Muller-Thym, Greg 'Storm' DiCostanzo, Paul Sabourin and Richard Hsu. 'Title of the Song' also credits Richard Greene as a songwriter. Axis of Awesome is an Australian musical comedy act comprised of the male members Lee Naimo and Benny Davis, and Jordan Raskopoulos, who came out as a transgender woman in 2016, though she performed as a man in the 'How to Write a Love Song' video. The implications of Raskopoulos's transgenderism for the boy band parody are interesting, though unfortunately beyond the remit of this thesis.

[2] An audio recording of 'Title of the Song' is available at Nefenjo, *Da Vinci's Notebook - Title of the Song WITH LYRICS*, accessed 19 April 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=734wnHnnNR4; a video recording of the song's live performance is available at Bob Kovacs, *DaVinci's Notebook - Title of the Song - July 2003*, accessed 19 April 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KBSq7SOTVJg.

[3] We might consider the element of pastiche that is present in these 'toolkit' parody songs. I do not want to suggest that these songs should be read primarily as songwriting aids; they clearly have a satirical and comedic function. The parody songs could, however, be used as an educational resource to instruct

I say something 'bout how I don't wanna break up
Then I turn around and rhyme it with 'make up'
I tell you that we should be together (how long?)
Forever (that long!) and ever (so long!)

[ … ]

This is how you write a love song
Yeah, this is how you write a cliched love song
This is how you write a love song
Yeah, a shitty 90s R&B love song[4]

The perspective of the lyrics shifts fluidly from explaining what the song is doing with an attitude of critical distance, to straightforwardly imitating a love song in a direct parody:

Girl, you're always in my heart (in my heart)
And I never wanna be apart (never be apart)
Honey, you'll always be mine (baby be mine)
Baby girl, it's chorus time

At other points in the song, Axis of Awesome take a step back to conduct a socio-economic critique of boy band pop: 'I know it's lazy song writing but I don't care/Cos I sleep on a big pile of money at night'. The lyrics of 'How to Write a Love Song' and 'Title of the Song' thus both constitute a playful and humorous critique of the generic and standardised nature of boy band and R&B love ballads. While Da Vinci's Notebook's song is not so explicitly critical of the music's economic context, the lyrics nevertheless draw attention to the banality and interchangeability of 1990s boy band songs.

aspiring songwriters on how to write a boy band/R&B pop song. By breaking the parts of the song down and observing their function, these songs have something in common with the numerous extant textbooks and online resources that give instructions on how to write a hit pop song. See, for example, Michael Lydon, *Songwriting Success: How to Write Songs for Fun and (Maybe) Profit: An Introduction to the Art and Business of Songwriting by One Struggling Singer-Songwriter for the Aid and Comfort of Other Strugglers* (London: Routledge, 2004); Pamela Phillips Oland, *The Art of Writing Love Songs* (New York: Allworth, 2003); Jai Josefs, *Writing Music for Hit Songs* (New York; London: Schirmer, 1996); Pat Pattison, *Writing Better Lyrics* (Cincinnati, Ohio: Writer's Digest, 2009); Chas. K Harris, *How to write a Popular Song* (Chicago: Charles K. Harris, 1906); Horatio Nicholls, *How to Write a Successful Song* (London: Lawrence Wright Music Co, 1929); 'Tabs That Show the Theory behind Songs - Theorytab', accessed 28 March 2018, https://www.hooktheory.com/theorytab.

[4] The video of 'How to Write a Love Song' is available at The Axis of Awesome, *How To Write A Love Song | Music Videos | Axis Of Awesome*, accessed 19 April 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L2cfxv8Pq-Q.

A number of such boy band songs validate Da Vinci's Notebook's critique. In 'My Everything' by 98 Degrees (which was released the same year as the parody song, in 2000) the chorus begins and ends with a repetition of the song's title, just as instructed in the parody:

> You are my everything
> Nothing your love won't bring
> My life is yours alone
> The only love I've ever known
> Your spirit pulls me through
> When nothing else will do
> Every night I pray on bended knee
> That you will always be
> My everything[5]

The lyrics of Boyz II Men's hit song 'On Bended Knee' (1994) also bear a strong resemblance to the parody, as Table 5.1 demonstrates.[6]

| **'On Bended Knee' lyrics** | **'Title of the Song' lyrics** |
|---|---|
| 'Oh God give me the reason, I'm down on bended knees' | 'Prayers to my chosen deity' |
| | 'Drop to my knees to elicit crowd response' |
| | 'Repetition of the title of the song' |
| 'Can we go back to the days our love was strong' | 'Request to turn back time' |

Table 5.1. *Comparison of lyrics in 'On Bended Knee' and 'Title of the Song'*

In both parody songs, the lyrics work together with the music (and in Axis of Awesome's song, with the video images) to name and satirise the devices used in boy band/R&B songs and videos. Table 5.2 shows how this works in verse 1.2 of 'How to Write a Love Song'.

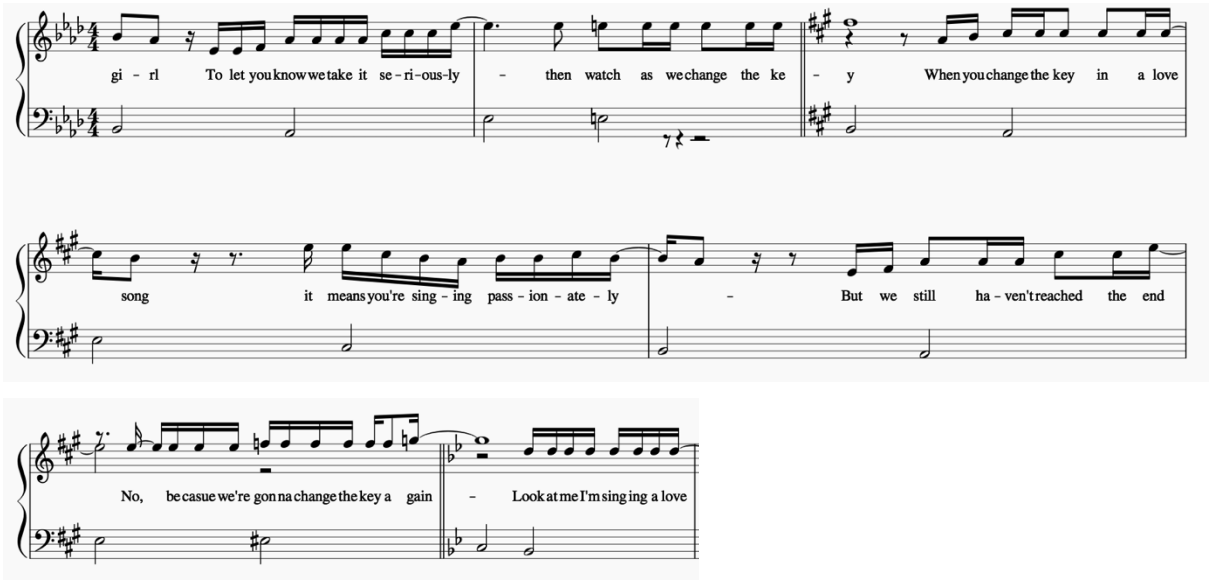
[5] 98DegreesVEVO, *98º - My Everything*.

[6] BoyzIIMenVEVO, *Boyz II Men - On Bended Knee*, accessed 17 April 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jSUSFow70no.

| Lyrics | Musical/visual device |
|---|---|
| 'The beat kicks in and then I sing a bit more rhythmically' | Lively percussion enters, and the words are sung rapidly, with emphasis on the first and third beats of the bar |
| 'To make it sensual I sing it in a minor key' | The verse is in the minor mode |
| 'I move my hands like I'm pushing someone in front of me (get out of my way)' | The band performs this dance move |
| 'Now that's the first verse and now I'm gonna take it to the bridge' | This line is followed by the bridge section |

Table 5.2. *Lyrics and musical/visual devices in 'How to Write a Love Song', verse 1.2*

Both 'How to Write a Love Song' and 'Title of the Song' describe the elevating modulation that takes place towards the end of each song. Da Vinci's Notebook sing 'modulation and I hold a high note' at the point at which the key is elevated by a semitone for the final reprise of the chorus. That the group choose this particular compositional device as the only one that is explicitly named in the lyrics draws attention to the elevating modulation as an especially ubiquitous cliché in boy band music. Axis of Awesome emphasise the elevating modulation by not only naming it in the lyrics as it happens, but also using it twice in close succession towards the end of the song. Example 5.1 shows this double modulation up a semitone each time, in the final reprises of the chorus.




Example 5.1. *Elevating modulations in 'How to Write a Love Song' (skeleton score; transcription by author)*

This double modulation constitutes an exaggeration of the devices used in boy band pop; 'genuine' boy band pop songs usually feature only a single elevating modulation.[7] The repetition of this gesture by Axis of Awesome thus leaves the listener in no doubt as to the band's satirical intent. In Chapter 4 I noted Griffiths' observation that in a sincere pop song, the elevating modulation serves to increase the intensity of the song's expression. In a parody pop song, the elevating modulation likewise has the effect of heightening intensity, but it is the intensity of the satire which is increased—that is, the *insincere* rather than sincere expression.

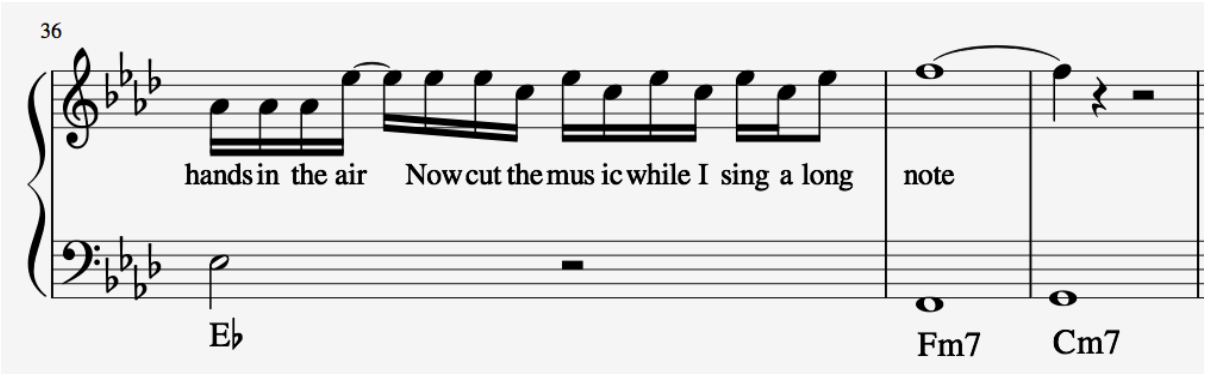
### 5.1.2 R&B /Boy Band Pop: Parodic Devices

Both parody songs (though especially 'How to Write a Love Song') lean towards the R&B edge of the boy band format. Axis of Awesome name their object of parody as 'a shitty 90s R&B love song', and they use several musical features that were commonly heard in R&B love songs produced in the 1990s and 2000s. While their song bears similarities to boy band tracks such as Backstreet Boys' 'As Long as You Love Me' and NSYNC's 'This I Promise You', it also resembles songs by solo R&B /pop artists including Sisqo, Craig David and Justin Timberlake. Towards the end of Sisqo's 'Incomplete' (released in 2007), the artist sustains an emotive long high note.[8] In 'How to Write a Love Song', a similar

[7] A double modulation is not unheard of, however. The final two reprises of the chorus in Boyz II Men's 'On Bended Knee' modulate up a semitone each time. Dai Griffiths observes that Barry Manilow's 'I Write the Songs' has two elevating modulations towards the end of the song in close succession. Manilow is often derided for the formulaic construction of emotion in his songs. Griffiths, 'Elevating Modulation', 40.

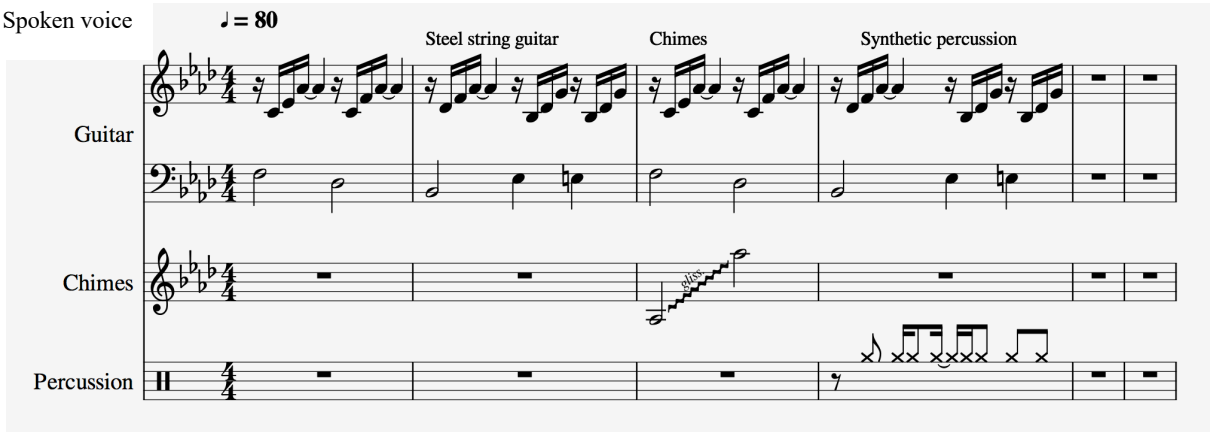
[8] peter082005, *Sisqo - Incomplete*, accessed 17 April 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z6qqS9mbdY4.

gesture is used when Jordan Raskopoulos sings, 'Now cut the music while I sing a long note' between the second chorus and the spoken interlude, as shown in Example 5.2.




Example 5.2. *Raskopoulos's long note (transcription by author)*

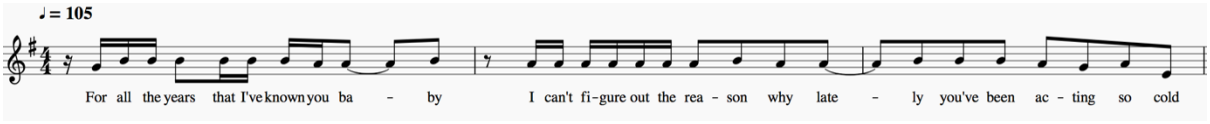
In the final reprise of the chorus in 'Incomplete', the main melody is taken over by a female voice, allowing Sisqo to overlay ad-libbed melismatic vocal effusions such as 'wooooh' and 'yeah'. The parody song satirises this with Benny Davis singing the line 'I'm just showing off my voice' over Lee Naimo's spoken interlude. Axis of Awesome explicitly reference the 'wind chime' or 'shimmer' effect which is frequently used in solo R&B love ballads as well as boy band songs.[9] In the opening bars of 'How to Write a Love Song' individual instruments are named in a deadpan manner as they enter the mix, including 'chimes' (see Example 5.3).



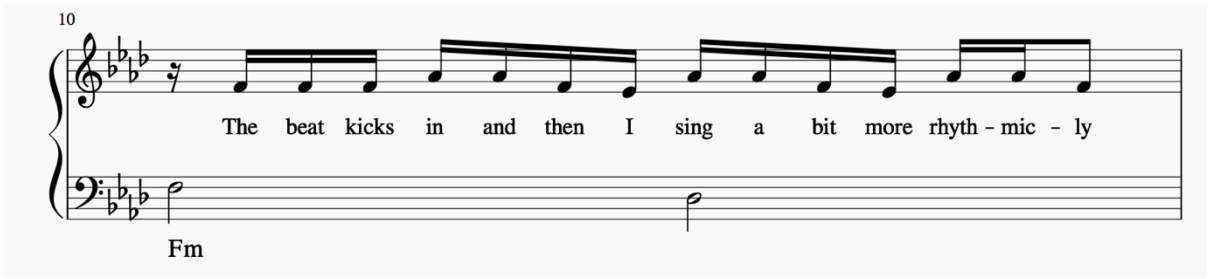

Example 5.3. *'How to Write a Love Song' instrumental introduction (transcription by author)*

[9] The wind chime effect is used at the beginning of 'Incomplete'. Luther Vandross' R&B song 'I'd Rather' (2001) also includes a liberal use of the chime effect throughout. Janko Skerlic, *Luther Vandross - I'd Rather*, accessed 18 April 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7wlDKqCVhLE.

Two of Craig David's songs from 2005 fit the criteria for targets of Axis of Awesome's parody. As shown in Examples 5.4 and 5.5, the fast-paced speech-rhythm of the vocal line of the verse in David's 'Don't Love You No More' is similar to that of verse 1.2 in 'How to Write a Love Song', which begins with the line, 'the beat kicks in and then I sing a bit more rhythmically'.[10]




Example 5.4. *'Don't Love You No More' verse 1 excerpt (transcription by author)*




Example 5.5. *'How to Write a Love Song' verse 1.2 excerpt (transcription by author)*

David's 'Unbelievable' switches between major and minor modes, includes a back-up voice in the chorus, and prominently features broken chords on the guitar – all of which are features heard in the parody song.[11]

### 5.1.3 References to Boyz II Men

Finally, 'How to Write a Love Song' includes several references to the videos of 90s R&B boy band Boyz II Men, directly imitating the costumes, production style and specific gestures of the band. Boyz II Men were notable for featuring multiple costume changes during the course of a video, but no matter what style was shown – whether shirts and ties, colourful sportswear, or pristine white suits – the four band members' outfits always matched each other. As demonstrated by Figures 5.1 and 5.2, Axis of Awesome imitate this in their video.

[10] RHINO, *Craig David - Don't Love You No More (I'm Sorry) (Official Music Video)*, accessed 19 April 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7MGowIeu3Tw.
[11] CraigDavidVEVO, *Craig David - Unbelievable (Official Video)*, accessed 17 April 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oRGbxfTiEaE.

Figure 5.1. *Still shots from Boyz II Men videos: (clockwise from top left) 'On Bended Knee' 4.26; '4 Seasons of Loneliness' 0.55; 'End of the Road' 2.21; 2.26 (images from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jSUSFow70no; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fUSOZAgl95A; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zDKO6XYXioc)*

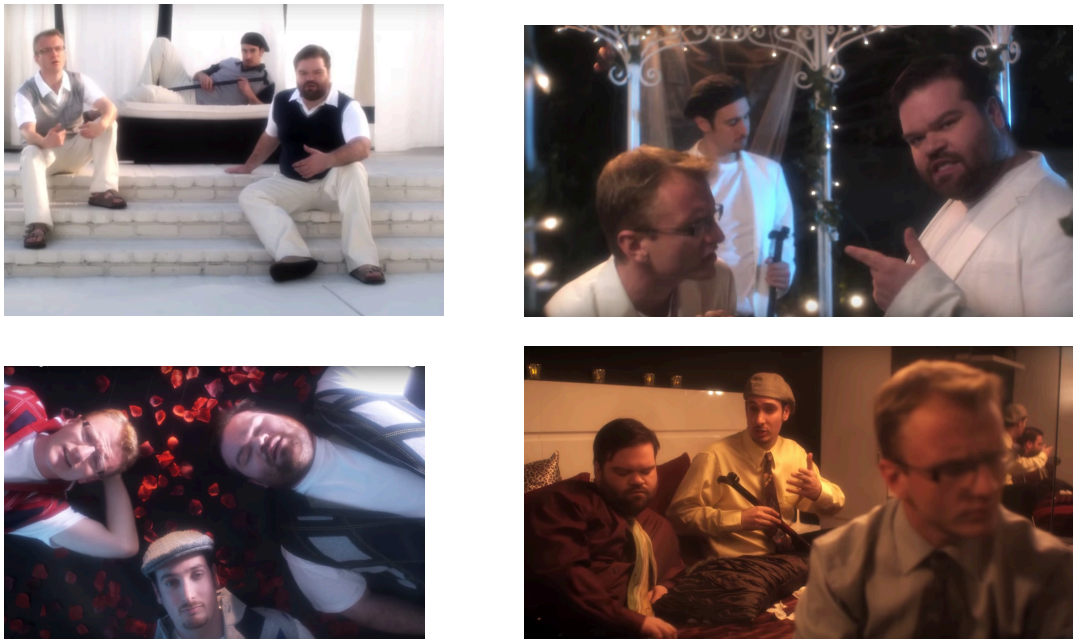


Figure 5.2. *Still shots from 'How to Write a Love Song': (clockwise from top left) 0.13; 1.25; 1.33; 2.28 (images from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L2cfxv8Pq-Q)*

The parody group reproduce the lighting style of Boyz II Men videos (used, for example, in 'I'll Make Love to You'), which gives the visuals an indistinct, dreamlike feel, reminiscent of the lower definition production necessitated by 90s technology.[12] The parody song copies a segment featured in the video for Boyz II Men's 'End of the Road' (1993), in which one of the singers presents a rose to a girl he is attempting to woo.[13] But the clearest reference to Boyz II Men comes through in the direct spoof of Michael McCary, who was one of the band members. McCary was known for his extraordinarily low bass voice, as heard in a spoken interlude featured in 'End of the Road'. In an exaggerated performance of sincerity, McCary crosses the fourth wall by looking straight into the camera to directly communicate with the viewer, who represents the girl that is the object of his affection:

> Girl, I'm here for you
> All those times at night when you just hurt me
> And just ran out with that other fella
> Baby I knew about it, I just didn't care
> You just don't understand how much I love you, do you?[14]

In 'How to Write a Love Song', this is imitated by Naimo, who does not take on any of the vocal parts until about two thirds of the way through the song, when he delivers a spoken interlude:

> Hey girl, I've been standing up the back not doing much for this song
> Well that's because my talents are quite limited
> But that don't mean that I love you any less
> [ … ]

Naimo imitates McCary's low bass voice, and performs directly into the camera as he mocks the sincerity with which McCary communicates with the viewer. The parody video even goes so far as to show Naimo holding a walking stick similar to that carried by McCary as a result of his suffering from Multiple Sclerosis (see Figure 5.2), a slightly uncomfortable gesture which could be read as Axis of Awesome mocking a disability in order to belabour the Boyz II Men parodic reference.

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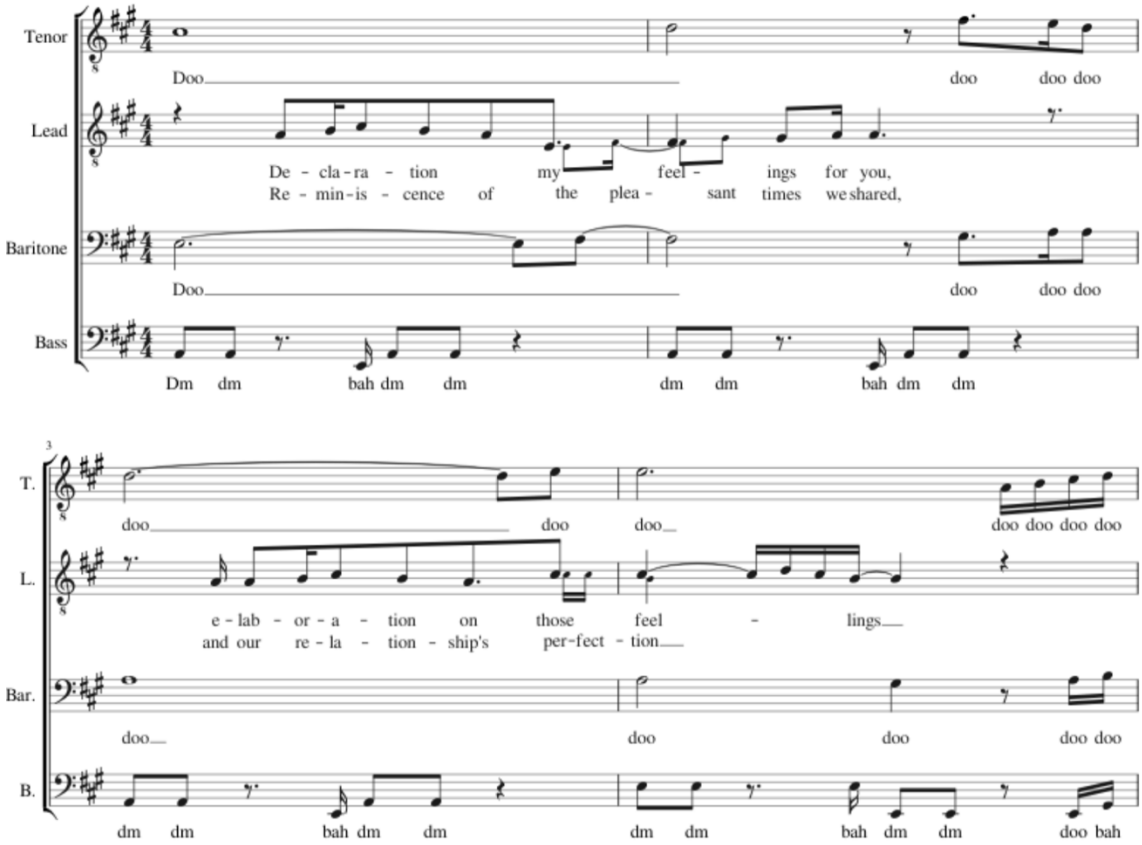
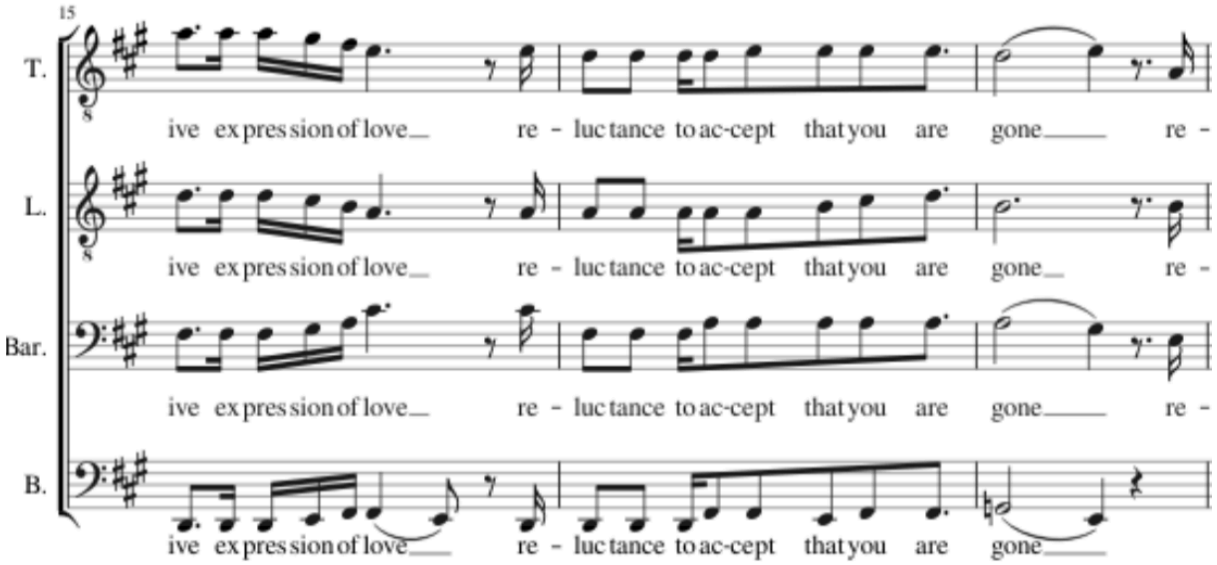
[12] BoyzIIMenVEVO, *Boyz II Men - I'll Make Love To You*, accessed 18 April 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fV8vB1BB2qc&list=PLeYg_hwALdsRK9GjsCJio1Nwhk15D-N8x.
[13] BoyzIIMenVEVO, *Boyz II Men - End Of The Road*, accessed 18 April 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zDKO6XYXioc.
[14] McCary also delivers a short spoken interlude in 'On Bended Knee'.

'Title of the Song' also bears resemblances to the output of Boyz II Men, though this is heard through the music, rather than video (the parody song has no accompanying music video). In its musical style, the song resides somewhere between the boy band love ballad, the barbershop quartet, and the a cappella interpretations of popular hits that have become especially widespread in recent years (through the popularity of the television show *Glee* and film *Pitch Perfect*, for example). It is striking for its a cappella texture: the lead voice sings the words; the wordless tenor and baritone voices mostly imitate the instrumental accompaniment; and the bass voice reproduces both the bass and percussion section. This is demonstrated in Example 5.6.




Example 5.6. *'Title of the Song' verse 1 excerpt (transcription by Forrest Deters at https://musescore.com/user/3930636/scores/3474511)*

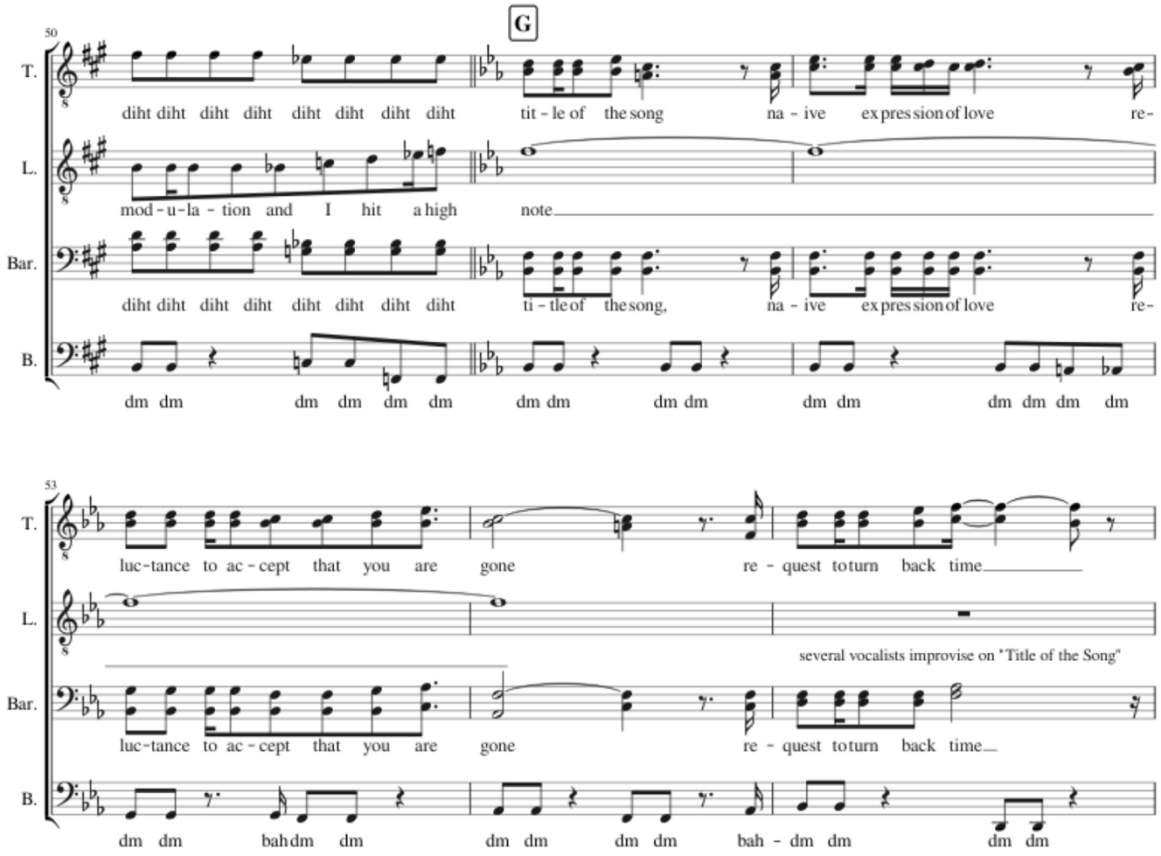
The song borrows harmonic elements from the barbershop quartet style, such as the 'swipe', where the melody voice sustains a pitch while the non-melody voices change pitch, thus altering the chord. This technique is used in the third line of the chorus on 'gone', where the chord moves from Gsus2 to E (see Example 5.7).




Example 5.7. *'Title of the Song' chorus excerpt (transcription by Forrest Deters at https://musescore.com/user/3930636/scores/3474511)*

Boyz II Men were exceptional within the contingent of 90s boy bands for their vocal proficiency and mastery of four-part harmony; like Da Vinci's Notebook, and unlike the boy band stereotype, all four members of Boyz II Men were skilled singers. Within the confines of the R&B ballad, their singing style was emotive and virtuosic. In addition to a liberal use of melismas, there are instances towards the end of a song in which one singer sustains a high note for a substantial length of time, while the other band members fill out the texture underneath with a reprise of the chorus.[15] I have already noted how such techniques are targeted in Axis of Awesome's parody; Da Vinci's Notebook also mock this style. Towards the end of 'Title of the Song', the lead vocalist sings 'modulation and I hold a high note', sustaining a high F on 'note' for four bars, while the other singers repeat the chorus, as shown in Example 5.8.

[15] Such gestures occur, for example, in 'On Bended Knee' and 'One Sweet Day' (with Mariah Carey). Chapter 5 cited David Metzer's critique of Boyz II Men's frequent use of melismas in their R&B power ballads.




Example 5.8. *'Title of the Song' chorus (third reprise) excerpt (transcription by Forrest Deters at https://musescore.com/user/3930636/scores/3474511)*

The most striking resemblance between Da Vinci's Notebook and Boyz II Men is the a cappella vocals, which the latter group employ in the final chorus reprise of 'End of the Road'. While most of the track has instrumental accompaniment, around 3.43 the texture smoothly transitions to a cappella, whereby the instruments drop away to be replaced by the vocal parts. The singers' imitation of the instrumental parts is impressive; the texture remains almost as thick as it was throughout the first part of the song. The bass line is smoothly taken over by McCary, while the drums are replaced by claps. This final section of the track thus sounds uncannily similar to 'Title of the Song' (in which percussion is simulated by finger clicks). In this brief final section of 'End of the Road', Boyz II Men present their own a cappella version of a boy band song, though unlike Da Vinci's Notebook's version, it is not intended as a parody.

## 5.2 R&B/Boy Band Pop at its Best

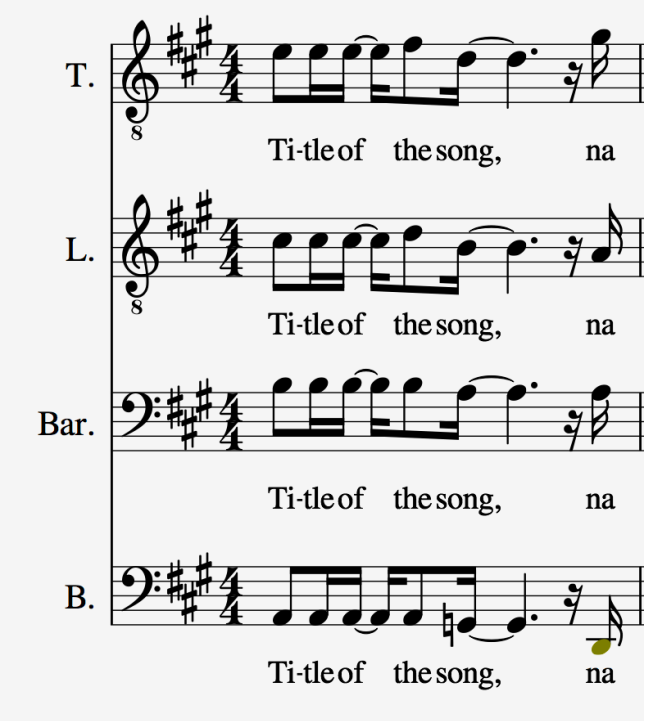
'How to Write a Love Song' and 'Title of the Song' are linked to a version of boy band pop that is specifically R&B-oriented. How does this connection with R&B affect the parodies' critical potential? R&B/pop is generally considered to be a more credible genre than boy band pop. This value judgement is partially linked to race: black genres such as R&B are perceived as more 'authentic' than white genres. While this might seem to indicate a positive valuation of blackness over whiteness, it is actually more likely that the connection between blackness and authenticity comes from the racist assumption (originating in the era of slavery) that black people are closer to nature—thus linking blackness with 'authentic' nature, and whiteness with 'inauthentic' culture. As a rare example of an all-black boy band, I noted in Chapter 5 that Boyz II Men were more critically acclaimed than many other boy bands of the time, including Backstreet Boys, NSYNC and Westlife.[16] The music by solo R&B artists is generally considered to be more 'serious' than boy band music, if only due to the genre associations. In Axis of Awesome's and Da Vinci's Notebook's parodies of boy band and manufactured pop, and especially the former group's implication that it is banal and thus 'bad' music, these bands have not chosen the most obvious targets. Rather than imitating the worst of what the genre has to offer, they turn their attention to an R&B-inflected style, which constitutes a more credible example of the format.

Both parody songs are produced with a level of craftsmanship which renders them a cut above the most banal examples of R&B/boy band pop. In their translation of the form to an a cappella texture, Da Vinci's Notebook produce an original interpretation of the standard formula of the boy band song. Although they may have taken their cue from Boyz II Men, they go further than the boy group by continuing the a cappella imitation of the instrumental parts throughout the whole of the song, rather than for only a final rendition of the chorus.[17] The harmony in 'Title of the Song' is rendered more inventive than many pop ballads by the addition of chromatic inflections typical of the barbershop style. This is heard most strikingly in the first bar of the chorus, in which the

[16] The measure of critical success earned by a pop act can be evaluated (to an extent) by noting the kinds of awards the act has garnered. The Backstreet Boys and NSYNC have won several American Music Awards, MTV Video Music Awards, and Billboard Music Awards, all of which are determined by public vote or commercial success. Boyz II Men, in contrast, have won four Grammy awards, which are determined by music industry professionals. This indicates that Boyz II Men prompted more critical acclaim than other boy bands. Unlike most boy bands from the 1990s, Boyz II Men continue to perform and release music as a group, thus defying the pattern of short-lived careers for boy band members.

[17] I should note that Boyz II Men recorded a cappella versions of many of their songs; however, these versions tended to foreground and embellish the vocal parts only, rather than have the vocals replace the instrumental parts, as happens at the end of 'End of the Road' or in Da Vinci's Notebook's 'Title of the Song'.

harmony shifts from the tonic chord (A major) on 'title' to the flat VII (G major) on 'song', as shown in Example 5.9.




Example 5.9. *'Title of the Song' chorus excerpt (transcription by author)*

On a structural level, 'How to Write a Love Song' resembles one of the more complex examples of R&B/boy band pop. The lyrics suggest that the music is flimsy and easy to produce: 'Baby I wrote you a love song/It wasn't hard and it really didn't take long'. But while the parody song might not have taken a long time to write, there undoubtedly exist other love songs that sound like they were produced in a much shorter space of time. Craig David's 'Unbelievable' is one of them. While they differ in melodic content, the verse and chorus have the same basic harmonic structure, repeating the pattern I-vi–V-IV in C (as demonstrated in Table 5.3). The bridge deviates slightly from this with the addition of a ii chord. Of course, harmonic structure is not the only measure of a song's banality, but in the case of 'Unbelievable', neither the melody nor the instrumentation does anything particularly exciting. David's 'Unbelievable' is thus the epitome of a banal R&B love song—but it is much more banal than the parody song that professes to reveal such banality.

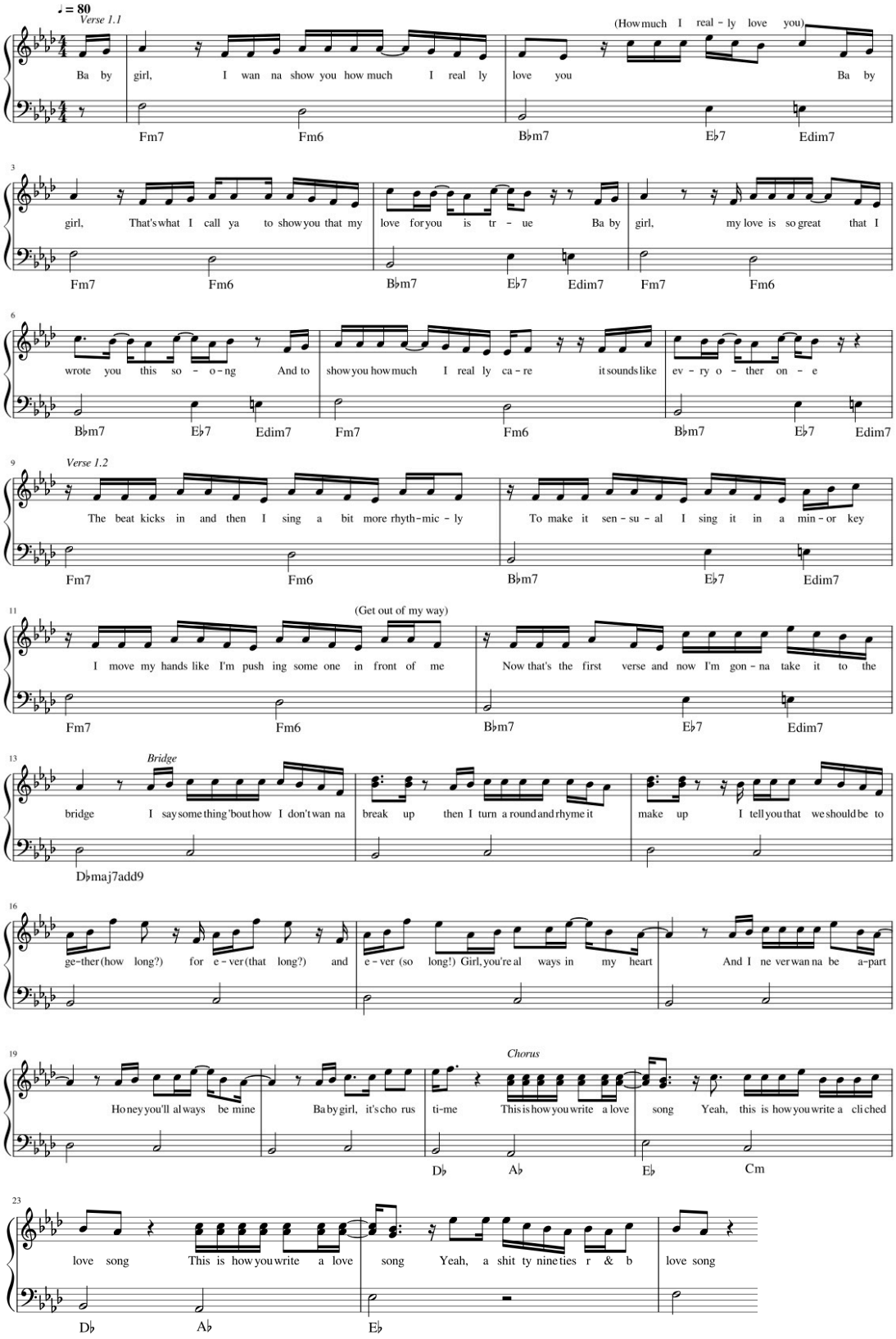
| Section | Harmony |
|---|---|
| Verse 1 | C Am G F (x3) |
| | F G Am Am G C |
| Chorus | C Am G F (x4) |
| | F G Am |
| Verse 2 | C Am G F (x3) |
| | F G Am Am G C |
| Chorus | C Am G F (x4) |
| | F G Am |
| Bridge | Dm G C Am (x2) |
| Instrumental | G F C Am G F |
| Chorus | C Am G F (x4) |
| | F G Am Am G C |

Table 5.3. *'Unbelievable' chord chart*

Table 5.4 and Example 5.10 demonstrate that, compared with 'Unbelievable', 'How to Write a Love Song' includes significantly more structural variation.

| Section | Bars | Chords |
|---|---|---|
| Instrumental intro | 4 | $Fm^7$-$Fm^6$/Db-$Bbm^7$-$Eb^7$-$Edim^7$ |
| Verse 1.1 | 8 | $Fm^7$-$Fm^6$/Db-$Bbm^7$-$Eb^7$-$Edim^7$ |
| Verse 1.2 | 4 | $Fm^7$-$Fm^6$/Db-$Bbm^7$-$Eb^7$-$Edim^7$ |
| Bridge | 8 | Dbmaj7add9-Dbmaj7add9/C-Dbmaj7add9/Bb-Dbmaj7add9/C |
| Chorus | 4 | Db/Bb-Ab-Eb-Cm |
| Verse 2 | 4 | $Fm^7$-$Fm^6$/Db-$Bbm^7$-$Eb^7$-$Edim^7$ |
| Bridge | 8 | Dbmaj7add9-Dbmaj7add9/C-Dbmaj7add9/Bb-Dbmaj7add9/C |
| Chorus | 4 | Db/Bb-Ab-Eb-Cm |
| Spoken interlude | 18 | $Fm^7$-$Cm^7$ |
| Chorus | 8 | Db/Bb-Ab-Eb-Cm |
| Chorus + modulation | 4 | D/B-A-E-C#m |
| Chorus + modulation x2 | 4 | Eb/C-Bb-F-Dm |

Table 5.4. *'How to Write a Love Song' chord chart*




Example 5.10. *'How to Write a Love Song' verse 1.1, verse 1.2, bridge, and chorus (transcription by author)*

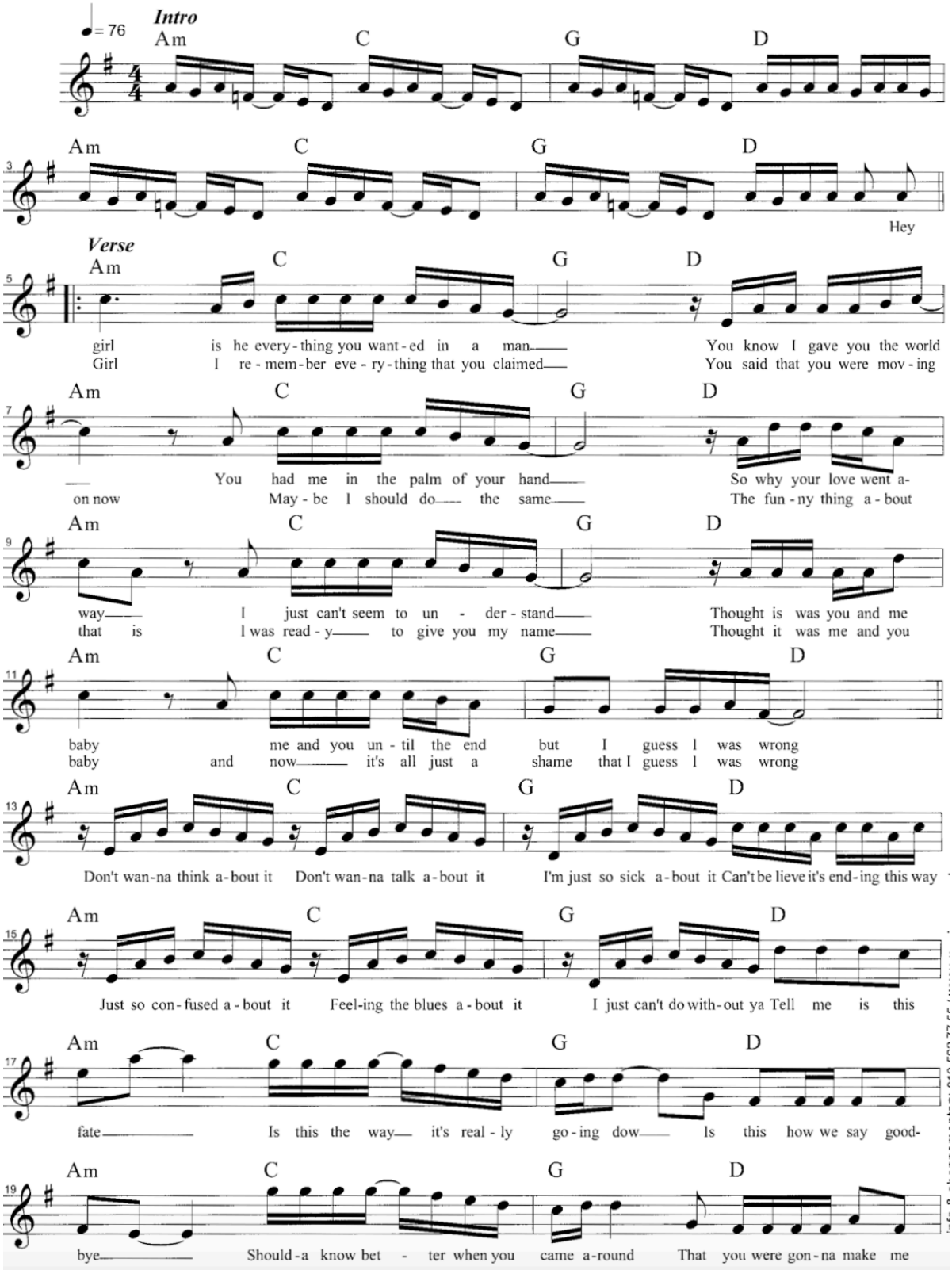
The pre-chorus melodic material is split into three distinct sections: verse 1.1, verse 1.2, and bridge. Each section has its own melodic hook (although the melodic material for verses 1.1 and 1.2 is related). The verse, bridge, chorus, and spoken interlude each have a distinct harmonic structure, though the main tonal contrasts result from the modal switches between sections: the verse is centred on F minor, while the chorus moves to a major modality. Although this three-part structuring of the pre-chorus material is not altogether rare in pop music, it is nevertheless notable when it happens, as it perhaps implies a more creative songwriting process than if the song took the more usual structure of verse-bridge-chorus or verse-chorus.[18] Compared with the most banal kinds of R&B/boy band pop, then, the parody song is constructed with a higher level of craft.

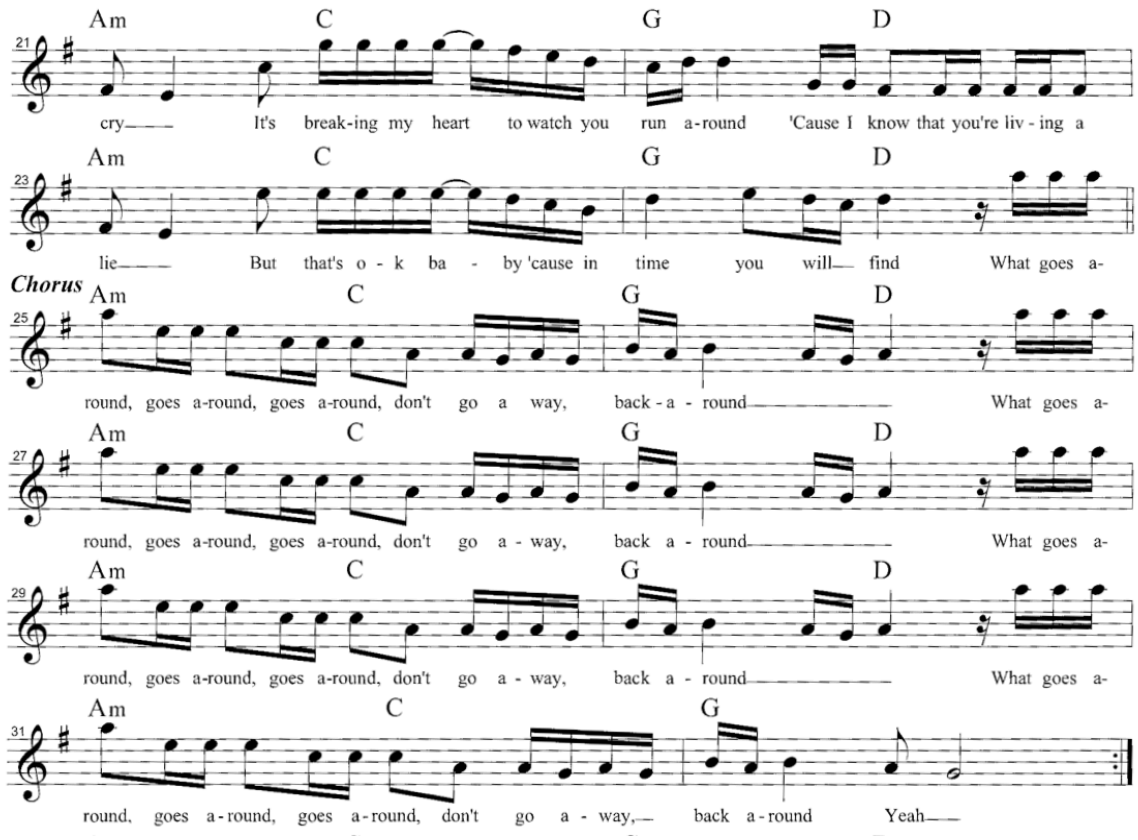
The structural similarities between 'How to Write a Love Song' and Justin Timberlake's 2006 track 'What Goes Around… Comes Around' (written and produced by the singer with Timbaland and Danja) support the idea that Axis of Awesome draw attention to the best that R&B/pop has to offer.[19] Timberlake's early solo music, on which he collaborated with the acclaimed producer Timbaland, received sufficient critical praise to redeem the singer from the perceived inauthenticity of his manufactured pop origins; Timberlake began his career as a teen star on the television show *The Mickey Mouse Club* before joining NSYNC. Graham has noted Timberlake's use of 'two-part complementary forms' as a structural tool that sets the artist apart from the standard pop output.[20] Timberlake's songs which embody this form are often lengthier than the conventional radio format ('What Goes Around' lasts 7 ½ minutes) and are split into two distinct yet complementary sections, which Graham labels s.I and s.II. The secondary section, s.II (which comes either before or after the primary section of s.I), serves to expand and develop the song in new melodic, harmonic, or textural directions. 'What Goes Around' takes on a two-part complementary form: s.I lasts 5 minutes 23 seconds, while s.II which follows lasts 2 minutes 6 seconds. Even without taking s.II into account, however, we can note that s.I as a stand-alone section already boasts structural attributes which distinguish it from other R&B hits, which are usually more banal. Like 'How to Write a Love Song', this includes the division of the pre-chorus melodic material into three distinct sections, beginning in bars 5, 13 and 17 respectively, as shown in Example 5.11.

[18] Several songs by the manufactured girl group Girls Aloud have received critical acclaim for their imaginative treatment of the pre-chorus material, including 'Love Machine' and 'Biology', in which this material is split into three and four distinct sections respectively.

[19] justintimberlakeVEVO, *Justin Timberlake - What Goes Around...Comes Around*, accessed 18 April 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TOrnUquxtwA.

[20] Graham, 'Justin Timberlake's Two-Part Complementary Forms'.


♩= 76
Intro
Am C G D
Hey
Verse
girl is he every-thing you want-ed in a man You know I gave you the world
Girl I re-mem-ber eve-ry-thing that you claimed You said that you were mov-ing
on now You had me in the palm of your hand May-be I should do the same So why your love went a-
The fun-ny thing a-bout
way I just can't seem to un-der-stand Thought is was you and me
that is I was read-y to give you my name Thought it was me and you
baby me and you un-til the end but I guess I was wrong
baby and now it's all just a shame that I guess I was wrong
Don't wan-na think a-bout it Don't wan-na talk a-bout it I'm just so sick a-bout it Can't be lieve it's end-ing this way
Just so con-fused a-bout it Feel-ing the blues a-bout it I just can't do with-out ya Tell me is this
fate Is this the way it's real-ly go-ing dow Is this how we say good-
bye Should-a know bet-ter when you came a-round That you were gon-na make me




Example 5.11. *'What Goes Around' s.I verse, bridge, and chorus (arrangement by Van Lindt and De Waardt; taken from http://www.sheetsdaily.com/piano/sheets/44629/Justin_Timberlake_What_Goes_Around__Comes_Around.html © Zomba Enterprises Music)*

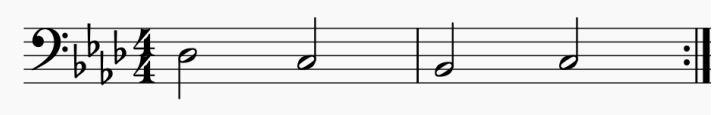
The ambiguity of the tonal centre in 'What Goes Around' s.I is also striking. Although there is a strong argument for identifying this as A minor or A dorian, we also feel the pull of G major: this is caused variously by the presence of F sharps, the frequent melodic emphasis of G (for example, the first three phrases of the melody come to rest on G), and the harmonic pattern Am–C–G-D, which could be read as ii–IV–I–V in G. A tonal resolution is never attained during the course of s.I—and if it were, it is not certain into which key it would resolve. (We might suggest that the addition of s.II is necessary to achieve this tonal resolution: s.II actually settles into E minor, which is the relative minor of G, or dominant minor of A.[21]) Although the tonal centre of 'How to Write a Love Song' is more secure than 'What Goes Around', the two songs nevertheless share a harmonic structure. In both songs the first verse (or verse 1.1 in 'How to Write a Love Song') is an 8-bar section, using a repeated pattern of four chords, with chord changes twice per bar. In 'How to Write a Love Song', the chord roots take the pattern Fm–Db–Bb-Eb, or i-VI-

[21] It might additionally be noted that the ambiguous tonality of s.I allows the song to more easily move to a different tonal centre for s.II.

IV-VII in F minor. 'What Goes Around' uses the sequence of Am–C–G-D, or i-III-VII-IV in A minor. Three out of the four chords used in the verse—i, IV, and VII—thus overlap in each song.[22]

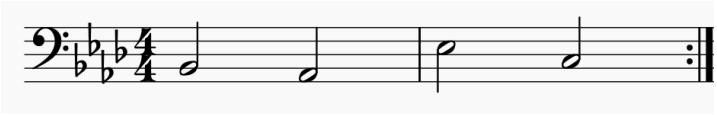
In Timberlake's song, the chord cycle of Am–C–G-D repeats throughout every section of s.I. The ambiguous modality and circular harmonic structure invoke a hypnotic pull on the listener which is both engrossing and disorienting. As the listener moves through the short melodic sections with the repeating harmonic pattern, they experience a sense of circular yet forward motion, as if the chord sequence is a wheel which pushes itself along to explore new melodic territory. (The repetitive and persistent groove built from the rhythm section also serves to propel the song forwards.) This circular motion is picked up in the chorus, which repeats the lyrical phrase 'What goes around, goes around, goes around / Comes all the way back around' in a melodic riff that resets itself for each new utterance. 'How to Write a Love Song' is also propelled by a circular motion in the bassline which is like a closed circuit in that it always folds back in on itself. As Examples 5.12-5.14 demonstrate, even though the bassline differs slightly between sections, it retains this essential pitch structure.

Example 5.12. *'How to Write a Love Song' verse bassline (transcription by author)*



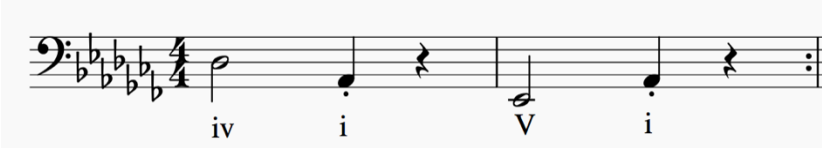
Example 5.13. *'How to Write a Love Song' bridge bassline (transcription by author)*

[22] There are also melodic resemblances between 'What Goes Around' and 'How to Write a Love Song'. In both songs, the verse begins with an anacrusis: a declaration of 'hey girl' and 'baby girl' respectively, which moves from the tonic to the third degree of the scale. Each song includes an emphatic pause on 'girl'. This third scale degree is then further emphasised in a semiquaver speech-rhythm utterance ('Is he everything you wanted in a man?' and 'I wanna show you how much I really love you' respectively), which descends to rest on the flattened leading tone (G and Eb respectively). In both songs, the 8-bar verse includes four melodic phrases, all of which are variations on this initial utterance. There are also resemblances between the first bridge in 'What Goes Around' (bars 17-24) and the chorus in 'How to Write a Love Song'. In each case the melodic phrases take on a call and response structure, with multiple harmonised voices uttering the first phrase ('is this the way it's really going down?' and 'this is how you write a love song' respectively), answered by a solo voice (or in Timberlake's case, two unison voices an 8ve apart) on the next phrase ('is this how we say goodbye?' and 'yeah, this is how you write a cliched love song').



Example 5.14. *'How to Write a Love Song' chorus bassline (transcription by author)*

A circular repeating bassline and harmonic structure is also heard in TLC's R&B song 'No Scrubs' (1999), which won a Grammy award. As Example 5.15 demonstrates, the bassline folds back in on itself in a similar pattern to 'How to Write a Love Song'.




Example 5.15. *'No Scrubs' bassline (transcription by author)*

Axis of Awesome's parody song thus bears more structural similarity with critically acclaimed R&B songs such as TLC's 'No Scrubs' and Timberlake's 'What Goes Around' than it does with the songs in this genre that have remained relatively unnoticed due to their banality, such as David's 'Unbelievable'.

Of course, structural complexity and variation between sections do not by themselves translate into music which should be more highly valued. Given that Axis of Awesome critique the 'lazy songwriting' that produces flimsy manufactured pop, however, these aspects of the song should be taken into consideration as a target of the song's critique. The revelation that Axis of Awesome—and Da Vinci's Notebook—are not in fact guilty of lazy songwriting, compared with many genuine pop songs, suggests two possible interpretations. First, one could conclude that these constitute loving parodies, with the comedy groups showing the boy band/manufactured pop format at its best. Choosing not to draw attention to the most impoverished kind of boy band music could be interpreted as an act of generosity towards the target of satire. Alternatively, one could suggest that Axis of Awesome and Da Vinci's Notebook demonstrate their superiority to the producers of many sincere pop songs by showing that not only can they convincingly imitate R&B/pop, but they can easily produce music that is better than much of the music heard in the charts. On top of this, the parody artists bring an extra element of comedy to their songs. Just as The Conchords embodied a superior position to Marvin Gaye by producing an imitation of Gaye's work that was self-reflective and funny, Axis of Awesome and Da Vinci's Notebook likewise attain this superior mode relative to their object of satire. They send a message to boy band/R&B

groups which says: 'not only have we made better music than you, but ours has the added bonus of making people laugh'.

The implication that these parody artists show boy band pop at its best can, however, be turned on its head, by suggesting that Axis of Awesome and Da Vinci's Notebook present R&B at its worst. While R&B/pop resides at the more credible end of the 'manufactured' spectrum, it nevertheless is considered to be the most manufactured—and therefore derided—of all black musical genres. In contrast with hip hop's attitude of anti-mainstream political resistance, R&B is unapologetically commercial, embracing its status as pop. Axis of Awesome emphasise this with the lines: 'I know it's lazy songwriting but I don't care/Cos I sleep on a big pile of money at night'. The difficulty in interpreting the attitude of these parody songs attests to Hutcheon's observation that parody can span a range of critical positions towards its original object, from loving to scathing—and that the interpretation of these positions can differ depending on the perspective of the audience.

## 5.3 Race

The racial tensions that pervade Axis of Awesome's parody of boy band/R&B are comparable to those already discussed in Chapter 4 in the context of The Conchords and other comedic white rappers. The group's parodic performance contains uncomfortable gestures that indicate a surface-level imitation of blackness. In particular, Naimo's imitation of McCary's bass voice in 'How to Write a Love Song' might be described as a 'blaccent'.[23] Axis of Awesome parody constructions of blackness, but they do so without explicitly demonstrating the self-reflexivity of the white hip hop parodists analysed in the previous chapter. The implications of these parodic gestures are complicated by the observation that before the advent of comedic boy band songs, performances by sincere white boy bands already (to a certain degree) constituted imitations of blackness. I suggested in Chapter 4 that the history of pop can be characterised by white artists imitating the musical styles and performative gestures of the black artists that came before them, often resulting in significant commercial gain for the white artist; Elvis Presley is perhaps the most famous example of this. The previous chapter also noted that the influences of black music in the hybrid style of North American boy bands function

[23] For discussions of the black voice and 'blaccent', see John H. McWhorter, *Talking Back, Talking Black: Truths about America's Lingua Franca* (New York: Bellevue Literary Press, 2017); Carvell Wallace, 'Stolen Language: The Strange Case Of Meghan Trainor's Blaccent', *MTV News*, 10 June 2016, http://www.mtv.com/news/2891156/stolen-language-the-strange-case-of-meghan-trainors-blaccent/; Bob Garfield, Mike Vuolo, and John H. McWhorter, *The Blaccent: What Does It Mean to Sound Black?*, Lexicon Valley (podcast), accessed 4 July 2018, http://www.slate.com/articles/podcasts/lexicon_valley/2016/05/blaccent_is_there_such_a_thing_as_sounding_black.html?via=gdpr-consent.

to give the music an air of credibility. The association of blackness with authenticity and whiteness with commercialism is also witnessed in the phenomenon of white artists who collaborate with black producers resulting in increased credibility for that artist, evident in Eminem's partnership with Dr. Dre and Timberlake's work with Timbaland.[24] The commercial success of white boy bands represents one example in a long tradition of the commodification of blackness in the pop music industry.

By focusing on a specifically R&B-oriented version of boy band pop—particularly the output of Boyz II Men—as the target of parody, suggesting that it is formulaic, commercial, and inauthentic, 'How to Write a Love Song' implicates blackness as being bound up with the music's commodification. Axis of Awesome are white artists who take it upon themselves to police the boundaries of authenticity in pop, and with this parody song they critique black artists for failing to display the required measure of credibility in their music. 'How to Write a Love Song' signals an inversion of the normative racial narrative that pervades the history of pop music, equating (as I have already noted) blackness with authenticity and whiteness with commercialism. In this standard narrative, black musicians are often positioned as in-the-know regarding musical creativity and originality, having traditionally been at the forefront of developments of new genres and sounds. But in Axis of Awesome's parody song, it is white musicians who present themselves as knowing, accusing a black genre of standardisation and lack of originality.[25]

The target of Da Vinci's Notebook's parody is perhaps more racially ambiguous. A live performance of 'Title of the Song' includes an interlude during which the lead singer, Greg 'Storm' DiCostanzo, leaves the stage and enters the audience, where he ad libs exclamations of 'yeah!' and 'my man!', drawing out the vowels in what can be described as a blaccent.[26] Singing in falsetto, he quotes a line from the hit song 'Give Me One Reason' by the black singer-songwriter Tracy Chapman, cutting himself off with a reprimand: 'Oh wait, I forgot I don't have enough soul to sing that', which can be translated as 'I'm not black enough to sing that'. Here, the implied target of mockery is white boy band members who might aspire to musical authenticity—by making the kind of music that black artists do—yet are unable to achieve this, as they are caught in the web of manufactured pop with little chance (or so it is implied) of breaking free.

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[24] The perception of white music as more commodified than black music may have less to do with the sound of the music than with the economic reality that white music has always sold better than black music. This may be the primary factor which has allowed black music to retain an aura of anti-commercial authenticity: black music couldn't be commercially successful, even if it wanted to be.

[25] It should be noted, however, that since parody is always a derivative form, here it is still white musicians (the parody artists) who are imitating black music, and who thus might be accused of a lack of originality.

[26] Bob Kovacs, *DaVinci's Notebook - Title of the Song - July 2003*.

DiCostanzo's character constitutes a parody of the aspiring Timberlake figure; Timberlake proves himself exceptional to the presumed fate of white boy band members in his ability to break out of the boy band format and attain credibility as an R&B artist. In a similar vein to the parodic white rappers discussed in Chapter 3, Da Vinci's Notebook mock white artists' failed attempt to make 'authentic' music. The quotation of a Tracy Chapman song emphasises the gulf in artistic credibility between white boy band singers and black solo artists; as a singer-songwriter who produces blues-inflected folk pop, Chapman can be seen to signify the epitome of so-called musical authenticity. But DiCostanzo's gesture can also be interpreted as targeting black boy bands such as Boyz II Men, implying that black artists who choose to move into the territory of boy band/manufactured pop are sacrificing their 'soul' in doing so.

### 5.3.1 The Parodied Becomes the Parody Artist: Timberlake and The Lonely Island's 'Dick in a Box'

These racial dynamics are complicated further by 'How to Write a Love Song's connection to the music of Timberlake, a white R&B artist who has also been involved in comedic parodies of 1990s R&B/pop. The singer's appearance on *Saturday Night Live* in 2006 led to a collaboration with The Lonely Island in a spoof music video entitled 'Dick in a Box', in which the male singers attempt to woo their female lovers in unconventional ways.[27] The video is inspired by early 90s R&B artists and groups such as R Kelly, Jodeci, Boyz II Men, and Color Me Badd. The scenes shot on a basketball court appear to be influenced by similar 'urban' settings of videos such as New Edition's 'Cool it Now' (1984). Timberlake and Samberg wear ill-fitting suits and fake facial hair that evoke a particular brand of 90s masculinity.[28] In particular, the video resembles several aspects of Color Me Badd's 1991 single 'I Wanna Sex You Up': the lyrical theme of sexual advances, and the passive women shooting suggestive glances at the men who have come to 'sex them up'.[29] The music of 'Dick in a Box' evokes the smooth style of early 90s R&B, similar to Jodeci's hit single 'Freek'n You' (1995).[30]

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[27] The original version of the video, with uncensored lyrics, is available to watch at metatube.com, *SNL-Dick in a Box (Uncensored Version)*, accessed 17 April 2018, http://www.metatube.com/en/videos/5631/SNL-Dick-in-a-Box-uncensored-version/. The Lonely Island collaborated with Timberlake on two other spoof R&B songs, 'Motherlover' (2009) and (with Lady Gaga) '3-Way' (2011).

[28] R Kelly and several members of Color Me Badd wear their facial hair in a similar style.

[29] 90sRnBmusyc, *Color Me Badd - I Wanna Sex You Up*, accessed 18 April 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kO6BtpIzIiM.

[30] JodeciVEVO, *Jodeci - Freek'N You*, accessed 18 April 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oYwL-FzFDKQ.

Unlike the parodies by Axis of Awesome and Da Vinci's Notebook, 'Dick in a Box' does not critique the socio-economic implications of mainstream pop, making no reference to formulaic song construction or the greediness of the music industry. Here, the main target of satire is not so much the music itself as the particular mode of masculinity presented by the singers, in their lyrics, fashion choices, and grooming style. The artists sing about their ingenious idea for a perfect Christmas present for their girlfriends: their penises in gift boxes.

> Girl you know we've been together such a long long time (such a long time)
> And now I'm ready to lay it on the line
> You know it's Christmas and my heart is open wide
> Gonna give you something so you know what's on my mind
> A gift real special, so take off the top
> Take a look inside—it's my dick in a box

By suggesting that the gift of sex with this man is something that all women should be grateful for, the lyrics poke fun at the idea of an R&B artist who holds a laughably high opinion of his own sexual and romantic prowess. The parody targets the attitude towards women (who function as props) and gross sexual propositions featured, for example, in 'I Wanna Sex You Up'. The mock seriousness with which the lyrics are delivered makes fun of the heartfelt sincerity of 90s pop which now, over two decades on, seems absurdly overblown. The music functions as a vehicle for these satirical lyrics.

'Dick in a Box' resides in the category of parody that lovingly pokes fun at its object rather than providing a scathing critique. The parody is light-hearted and affectionate, and functions more through historical distance than cynical distance. Describing the inspiration for the video, Samberg explains that the members of The Lonely Island and Timberlake together 'commiserated over the fact that we were all four, sort of, raised on early 90s R&B, and we had that shared affection/ironic love for it'.[31] 'Dick in a Box' is playfully nostalgic, based on the artists' collective memory of the music of their youth. The ironic part of the love is presumably fuelled by a sense that, in looking back, the tropes of 90s R&B now seem to be embarrassingly outdated; they have not aged well. Penny Spirou observes of the fashion and styling used in the video that 'audiences who look at only these visual aspects may find humour in the nostalgia. They recall the look of the 1990s boy band music video and see how things have changed to the point where it seems completely dated'.[32] The message of the parody video is thus: 'look, isn't it

[31] art/research, *The Lonely Island & Justin Timberlake's 'Dick In A Box' Goes Viral (2006) | SNL In The 2000s (2010)*, accessed 18 April 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vhQSnLEOVJ8.
[32] Spirou, 'The Lonely Island's "SNL Digital Short" as Music Video Parody', 133.

funny how 90s R&B artists used to dress and act—we know better than to do this now'. By making fun of his own musical genre of R&B, Timberlake demonstrates a knowing self-reflexivity; but since the music targeted is from an earlier era, he also embodies a position of knowing superiority (with the advantage of historical distance) relative to the object of parody. He not only produces sincere R&B/pop that is deemed to be credible, but he is involved in a comedic parody of music of this genre that, from the advantage of historical distance, is deemed to be inferior. His production of 'good' R&B/pop gives him the authority to make fun of 'bad' R&B/pop. Further to this, the parody's knowing nod to Timberlake's participation in the exaggerated sincerity of 90s pop as a member of NSYNC displays the artist's self-awareness and ability to poke fun at his past musical persona. Timberlake is thus shown to have his cake and eat it too.

To an extent, Timberlake's racial position with regards to his R&B parodies is comparable to Eminem's place within hip hop. There is a sense that (unlike other white artists) Timberlake has the authority to make fun of the black genre of R&B due to the credibility he enjoys as a white R&B artist, which (as I have already noted) partly comes from his collaboration with the black producer Timbaland. A light-hearted critique of a genre's sonic and visual style from a past era, if successful, can cement the parody artist's sense of belonging in that genre—especially if it involves a self-reflexive mockery of one's musical past. Poking fun at 90s R&B thus functions as an immersive strategy for Timberlake, increasing his credibility as a serious R&B artist of the 2000s. This is not to say, however, that this immersive strategy helps to alleviate the problem of cultural appropriation in which Timberlake is implicated, as one of the white artists profiting from black music named in J. Cole's 'Fire Squad'. Timberlake signifies 'blue-eyed soul' of the 2000s: like Eminem, he took a black musical form, sold it to white audiences, and achieved immense commercial and critical success. In another parallel with Eminem's collaboration with Dr. Dre, the black producer remained behind the scenes, while the white face of Timberlake sold the music.

The Lonely Island's work with black artists serves to grant the group access to parodying several different kinds of music from black traditions. The group's collaboration with the pop/R&B artist Akon in the song 'I Just had Sex' (2011) is sonically similar to Akon's sincere tracks. Akon willingly joins in with The Lonely Island's attitude of self-mockery, which indicates that the group's use of black musical genres for vehicles of their comedy is light-hearted and affectionate. Leberg describes how The Lonely Island's collaboration with T-Pain in their spoof song 'I'm on a Boat' (2009) negates the possibility of cultural appropriation by crossing racial divides, with both black and white artists presenting a united front in their mockery of whiteness:

> T-Pain's tongue-in-cheek performance alongside Samberg and Schaffer casts the black rapper in a symbolic and satirical white-face. T-Pain's dancing style, echoing lyrics, and costuming are consistent with those of Samberg and Schaffer, thereby collapsing all of their racialized performances into a tongue-in-cheek white-face which reveals whiteness as a constructed facade, revealing the invisibility by normalizing and standardizing all racial performances within this music video. If 'I'm On A Boat' is a racist text, the butt of the joke is a performance of whiteness whose bombastic mediocrity seems too small for the video's grandiose formal construction. One would be hard pressed to argue that T-Pain is vicariously victimized racially for being forced to play against his usually-cool stage presence being associated with Samberg and Schaffer's nerdy antics. For better or worse, the presence of established and successful black rapper T-Pain prevents the appropriation of rap video aesthetics from seeming racially exploitative; tongue-in-cheek T-Pain is complicit in the joke at the expense of Samberg and Schaffer's whiteness.[33]

The songs discussed in this chapter so far present several different strategies used by white artists to parody black music. Axis of Awesome do not attempt to construct a legitimising strategy for their parody of R&B boy bands (specifically Boyz II Men), demonstrating the lowest level of self-reflexivity in this regard of the artists analysed. Da Vinci's Notebook, like Axis of Awesome, also reference black music from the perspective of racial outsiders (the group includes no black members), though in their mocking of white artists as much—if not more—as black artists, they show an increased level of sensitivity towards the issue of race compared with the other group. Timberlake, meanwhile, pokes gentle fun at R&B from the position of a semi-insider, while The Lonely Island collaborate with black musicians in order to alleviate the possibility that their parodies of hip hop and R&B are identified as appropriation. But even when parody artists demonstrate sensitivity regarding the racial implications of their songs, the uncomfortable fact remains that it is mostly white artists who position themselves with a superior attitude of knowingness by making fun of black music.[34]

As a white R&B artist and former boy band member who is both the producer and the object of pop parodies, Timberlake occupies multiple different subject-positions at once. With NSYNC, he produced boy band pop that is generally considered to be the least authentic of all musical forms. As a commercially successful and critically acclaimed R&B artist, he has mastered a black musical form. His style of solo music is parodied in 'How to Write a Love Song', in a gesture which purports to reveal the music's banality but actually emphasises Timberlake's music (and Axis of Awesome's parody)

[33] Leberg, 'Self-Reflexive Whiteness'.

[34] A recent example of a black artist parodying black music is the spoof grime track 'Man's Not Hot' released by Big Shaq (real name Michael Dapaah) in 2017, which reached number 3 in the UK charts and garnered over 270 million YouTube views. Michael Dapaah, *BIG SHAQ - MANS NOT HOT (MUSIC VIDEO)*, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3M_5oYU-IsU.

as more creative than many other examples of R&B pop. Finally, he produces parody songs of 1990s R&B in a move which mocks black artists, self-reflexively pokes fun at his boy band past, and secures his position as a credible practitioner of sincere R&B in the 2000s and 2010s. Timberlake's whiteness is a crucial factor which enables him to shift seamlessly between these identities, all of which have a different relationship with the construct of musical authenticity. It is unlikely that the agency which allows Timberlake to occupy all these spaces simultaneously would be afforded to a black artist. Pop parody thus shows up issues of privilege and power relating to racial identity, and its lens presents a new angle from which to observe the relationships between authenticity, race, and commercialism in pop.

## 5.4 What Makes Effective Parody?

Regardless of the racial dynamics of each individual song, all the comedy songs discussed so far in this chapter show an affectionate attitude (to a greater or lesser extent) towards their object of parody. Even when the parody artists intend to mock R&B/boy band pop, they nevertheless construct songs which show the genre at its best. To an extent, the goal of the musical comedian aligns with that of the 'sincere' pop artist: both want their music to be enjoyed by an audience. In order for their music to be enjoyable, it must (usually) be easy to listen to, memorable, and catchy—with an appealing earworm, for example. The greater the level of craftsmanship that goes into producing the parody song, the more effective the comedy is. If a song is well crafted, it has more credibility both as an artistic object and as a comedic artefact.

If the target of parody is 'bad' music, then the parody artist is faced with a difficulty: if they imitate bad music by making their parody sound just as terrible as the original, then audiences might not want to listen to it. On the other hand, if they produce a parody song that is better than the music which is being targeted (and if the aim of the parody is to critique bad music), then it can be argued that the parody will not be persuasive, and contain a contradiction: the lyrics critique the dismal quality of the music, yet the accompanying music is in not in fact bad. Another possibility is available, however. It might be the case that some audience members are fans of the original 'bad' music, and also enjoy a light-hearted parody of it. The parody song thus addresses two distinct audiences: one which genuinely enjoys the original, and therefore appreciates a parody song in the same style; and one which is critical of the original, and therefore enjoys that parody for its mocking attitude.

Pop parody embodies a position of critical ambiguity in relation to a) the music that it targets, b) the fans of such music, and c) the wider socio-economic implications of this

music's popularity. As the case studies in the second half of this chapter will demonstrate, pop parody evades the normative binary of 'critical' and 'uncritical' music set out by Max Paddison, whose interpretation of Adorno's theory suggests that we can divide musical works into these respective categories:

> The split is not essentially between serious and popular as such—a division which has become, in his view, increasingly meaningless due to the effect of the culture industry and the almost inescapable commodity character of all cultural products in the twentieth century. The split is much more between, on the one hand, music which accepts its character as commodity, thus becoming identical with the machinations of the culture industry itself, and, on the other hand, that *self-reflective* music which critically opposes its fate as commodity, and thus ends up by alienating itself from present society by becoming unacceptable to it.[35]

Uncritical music, according to Paddison, has an 'objective' character. It affirms the existing state of society, offering no glimpse of anything that does not fit into the current order, thus providing the listener with little truth-content or potential for emancipation.[36] Critical music, on the other hand, has a 'subjective' character. It challenges the existing socio-economic order, attempting 'to reveal cracks in the "false totality" through which that which is "not yet identical" may still be glimpsed'.[37] Such an interpretation allows for some popular music—that which poses a challenge to its commodified status—to be considered critical and self-reflective, just as it is possible for some 'art' music to succumb to the demands of the culture industry with little resistance.

The parody songs discussed so far in this chapter resist their status as wholly 'objective' or 'uncritical' texts partly by refusing to accurately imitate the most banal (or the most objectified) music that is produced by the culture industry. The next part of the chapter, in contrast, examines parody songs by the Canadian musician and comedian Jon Lajoie which wholeheartedly embrace the banality of commodified aesthetics, imitating the kinds of songs which perhaps most closely represent Adorno's idea of commodified music. Such songs pose the question of whether music can be critical even when it is banal. It may be the case that Adorno/Paddison's theoretical framework is not particularly effective in accommodating a derivative form such as parody. Adorno does not seem to consider the possibility that someone might deliberately choose to produce banal music in an attempt to critique it. The difficulty of knowing where to

[35] Paddison, 'The Critique Criticised', 204 (italics original).

[36] Paddison, 205.

[37] Paddison adds that it 'strives, through negation, to retain a necessary tension between subject and object, individual and collectivity'. Paddison, 207.

place parody songs in the 'critical/uncritical' binary stems from the parody's status of satirically critiquing a form through replicating that form. A stand-up comedian such as Stewart Lee does not encounter this problem (except on the rare occasions when he satirises another performer's stand-up).[38] Lee critiques all manner of phenomena and art forms—political figures, books, television, cultural trends—through an art form (stand-up comedy) that is removed from these things. Scott Sharpe, J.-D. Dewsbury, and Maria Hynes consider Lee's stand-up comedy to act as a 'micropolitical intervention': his humour 'functions as a generative political act, which can subtly modify dominant social norms and structures of anticipation'.[39] This emancipatory, transformative element to Lee's comedy is similar to Paddison's ideal of 'critical' music. But Lee crafts a self-contained art form which, while relying on the political events and cultural artefacts that inspire its content, is not derived from them in the way that parody is. It is easier to create emancipatory or 'critical' art when the art form stands up on its own.[40] In contrast, the danger of parodying a text in order to show that it is aesthetically impoverished is that the work of parody will necessarily also be aesthetically impoverished. Chapter 3 cited Hutcheon's observation that parody has a potentially conservative function of repeating and thus reinforcing the parodied object. Axis of Awesome and Da Vinci's Notebook circumvent this problem by dressing up their basic representations of boy band pop with additional features: whether this is references to specific boy bands and artists, skilled a cappella singing, or clever and humorous lyrics. As will become clear throughout the next part of this chapter, however, Lajoie shuns all such possible additions in favour of a more straightforward critique.

## 5.5 Jon Lajoie: 'Pop Song'

In the last decade Jon Lajoie has garnered a substantial number of YouTube views for his humorous videos, some of which parody conventions and attitudes in several different genres of pop music; he is particularly known for his parody hip hop personae

[38] In one of his stand-up routines, Lee satirises the stage manner of Michael McIntyre. See Fist Of Fun Dot Net, *Stewart Lee - Carpet Remnant World - 'Observational Comedy.*

[39] Scott Sharpe, J.-D. Dewsbury, and Maria Hynes, 'The Minute Interventions of Stewart Lee: The Affirmative Conditions of Possibility in Comedy, Repetition and Affect', *Performance Research* 19, no. 2 (2014): 116.

[40] A further difficulty in assessing the critical potential of parody songs stems from their residing in between two different art forms: comedy and music. It is perhaps more straightforward to assess the critical potential of 'pure' music or 'pure' comedy (such as Lee) than a hybrid form like musical comedy. The paucity of academic literature on musical comedy means that we have no adequate framework for exploring the critical resistance of the parody song. Paddison/Adorno's theory of critical music was perhaps not formulated with such liminal forms in mind.

'Everyday Normal Guy' and 'MC Vagina'.[41] In addition to his comedy output, Lajoie has released non-humorous folk pop music under the moniker 'Wolfie's Just Fine'. Two of his parody songs critique the aesthetic banality and socio-economic position of mainstream pop: 'Pop Song' (2010) and 'Radio Friendly Song' (2009).[42] The music video entitled simply 'Pop Song' appears at first glance to be a parody of the boy band format. Lajoie presents himself as a five-member boy band, portraying all the members—who are differentiated by their outfits and hair styles—simultaneously. Each version of Lajoie depicts a contrasting typical boy band persona: the fun one; the effeminate, innocent one; the bad boy punk; the rapper; and the sharply-dressed ladies' man. Lajoie emphasises the superficiality of the band members' constructed identities, implying that all the boys are interchangeable. The presentation of five clone-like Lajoie figures contains a sinister edge which is rather unsettling for the viewer.

The critical attitude of 'Pop Song' contrasts with both 'How to Write a Love Song' and 'Title of the Song'. Regarding its object of parody, 'Pop Song' is much less affectionate and much more explicitly cynical. This cynicism comes through clearly in the lyrics, which present an attack on the culture industry, specifically targeting the manufactured boy band format:

> Wealthy men hired me to sing
> This song that they wrote for me. They're investing
> In this pricey music video, and they're paying
> To get it played on the radio (on the radio).
> And they're gonna sell a million (a million),
> Yes, it's gonna go platinum.
>
> 'Cause they'll market this song to young, impressionable, and insecure teenage girls.
> 'Cause all you gotta say is 'ooh baby', 'I love you', 'ooh, girl, I need you in my world'.
> Yes, they'll market this song to young, impressionable, and insecure teenage girls.
> 'Cause all they gotta do is find a sexually attractive man that can sing all the words.
>
> And now the token rap verse that doesn't make any sense
> But helps to get a small percentage of the urban music market.

---

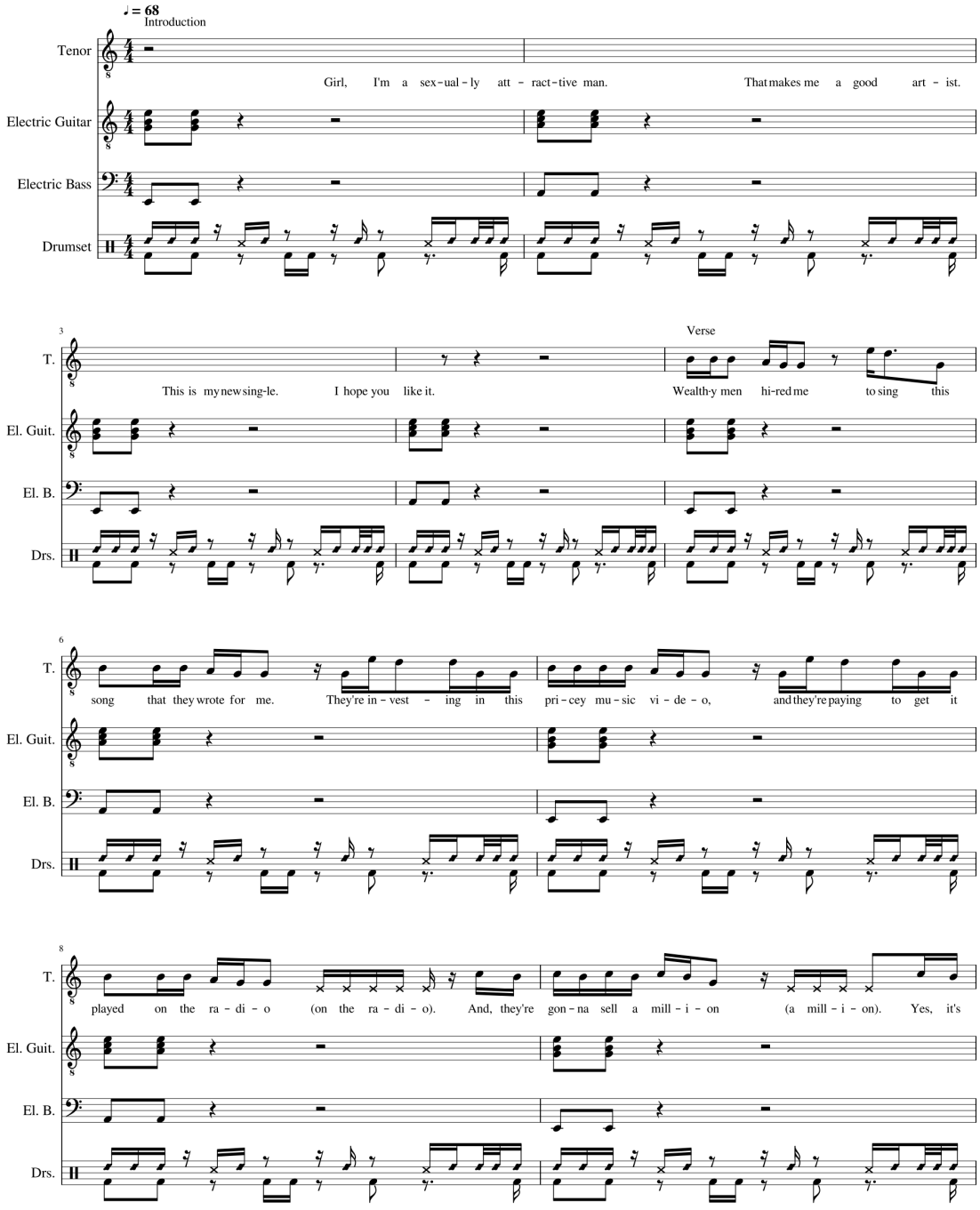
[41] 'Everyday Normal Guy' was analysed in Chapter 4 of this thesis. The original 'Everyday Normal Guy' video, from 2007, has 36 million YouTube views, while MC Vagina's 'Show Me Your Genitals', from 2008, has 74 million views. JonLajoie, *Everyday Normal Guy*; JonLajoie, *Show Me Your Genitals*, accessed 15 May 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qqXi8WmQ_WM.

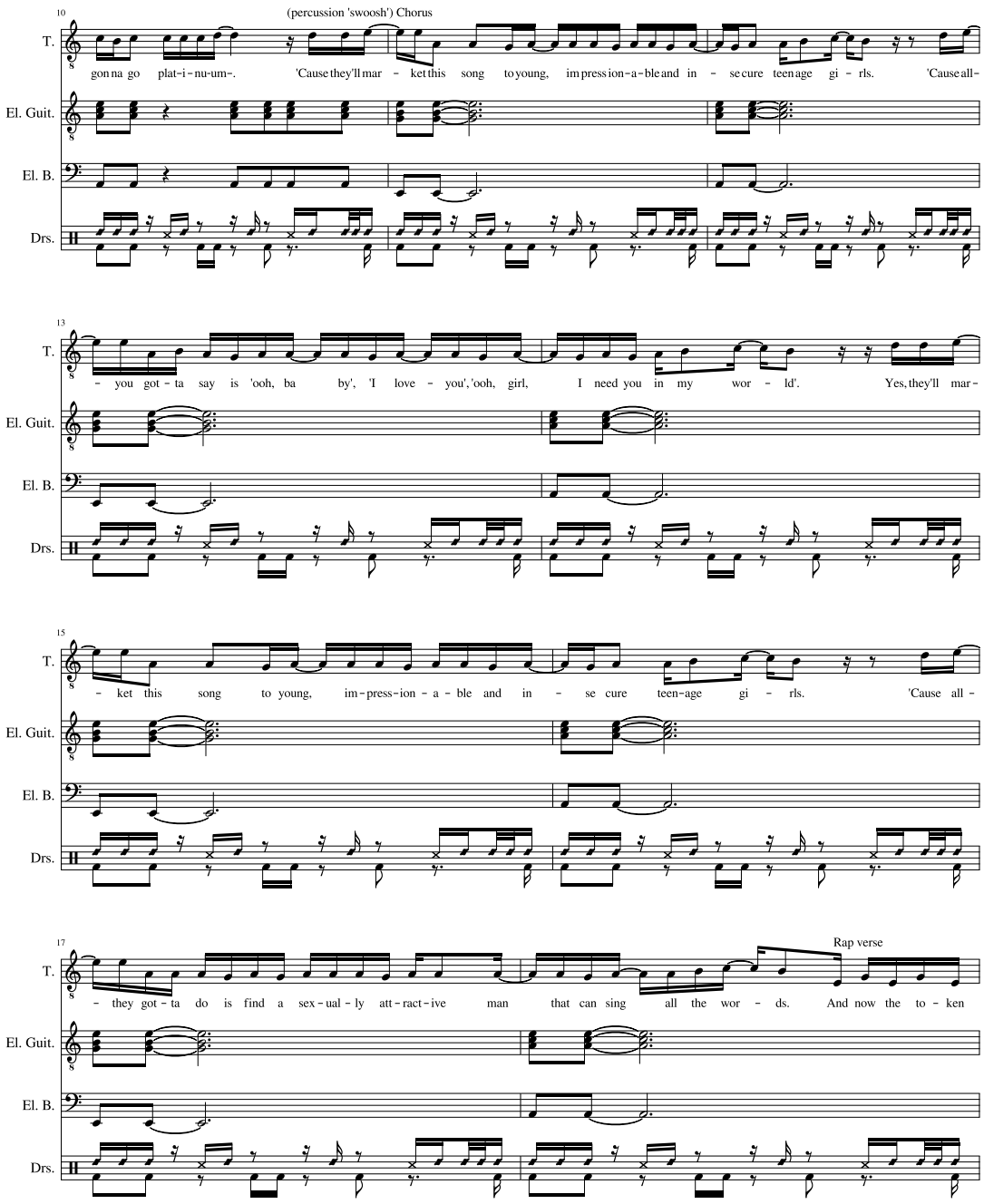
[42] JonLajoie, *Pop Song (Jon Lajoie)*, accessed 15 May 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ijr4rwb2WbE; JonLajoie, *Radio Friendly Song*, accessed 15 May 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A0Gs4xGw1Eg.

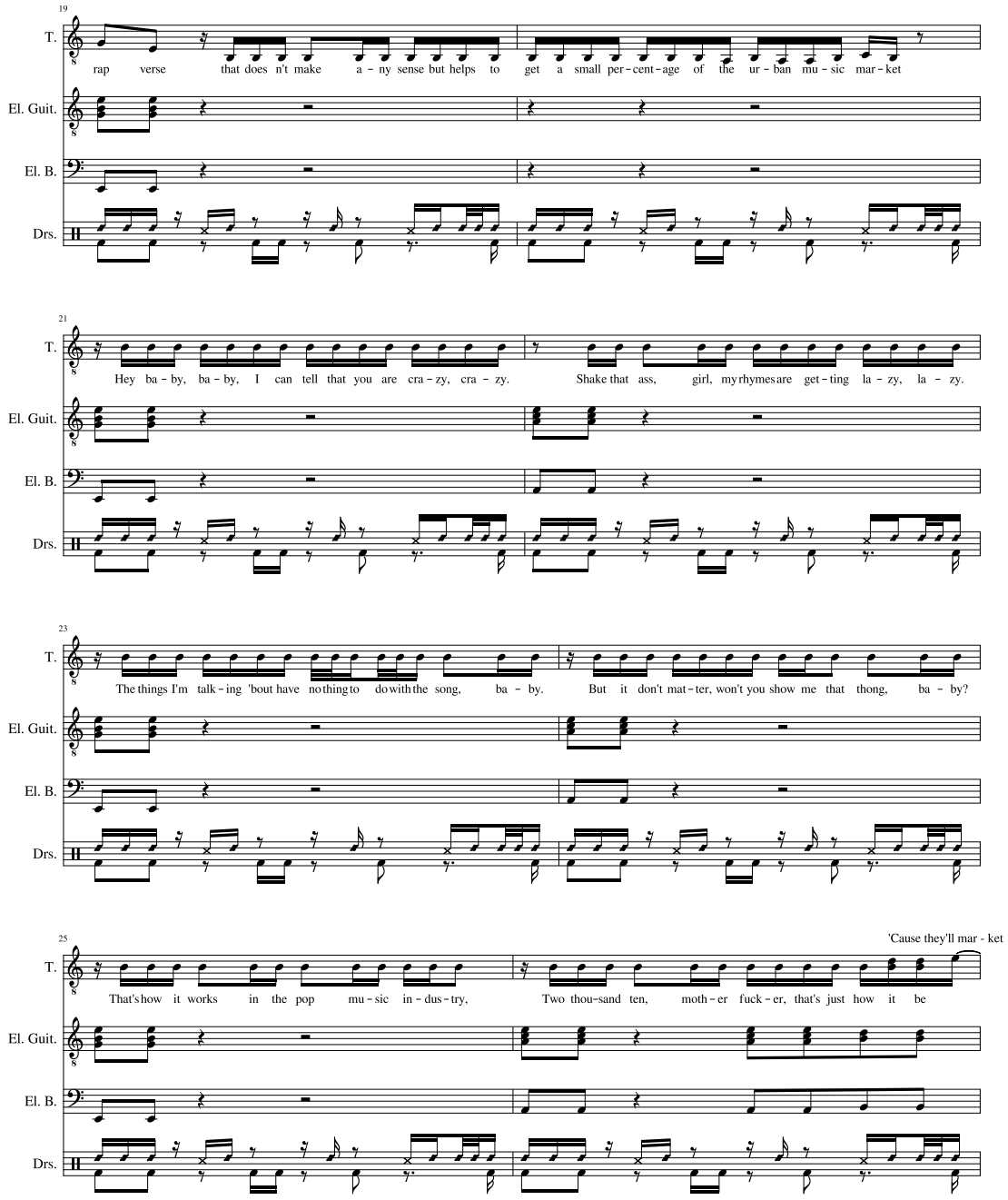
Compared with the parody songs by Axis of Awesome and Da Vinci's Notebook, the tone of 'Pop Song' is less playful, presenting an upfront, scathing critique of the manufactured pop format. The cynicism of the lyrics is combined with the disquieting effect of the Lajoie clones.

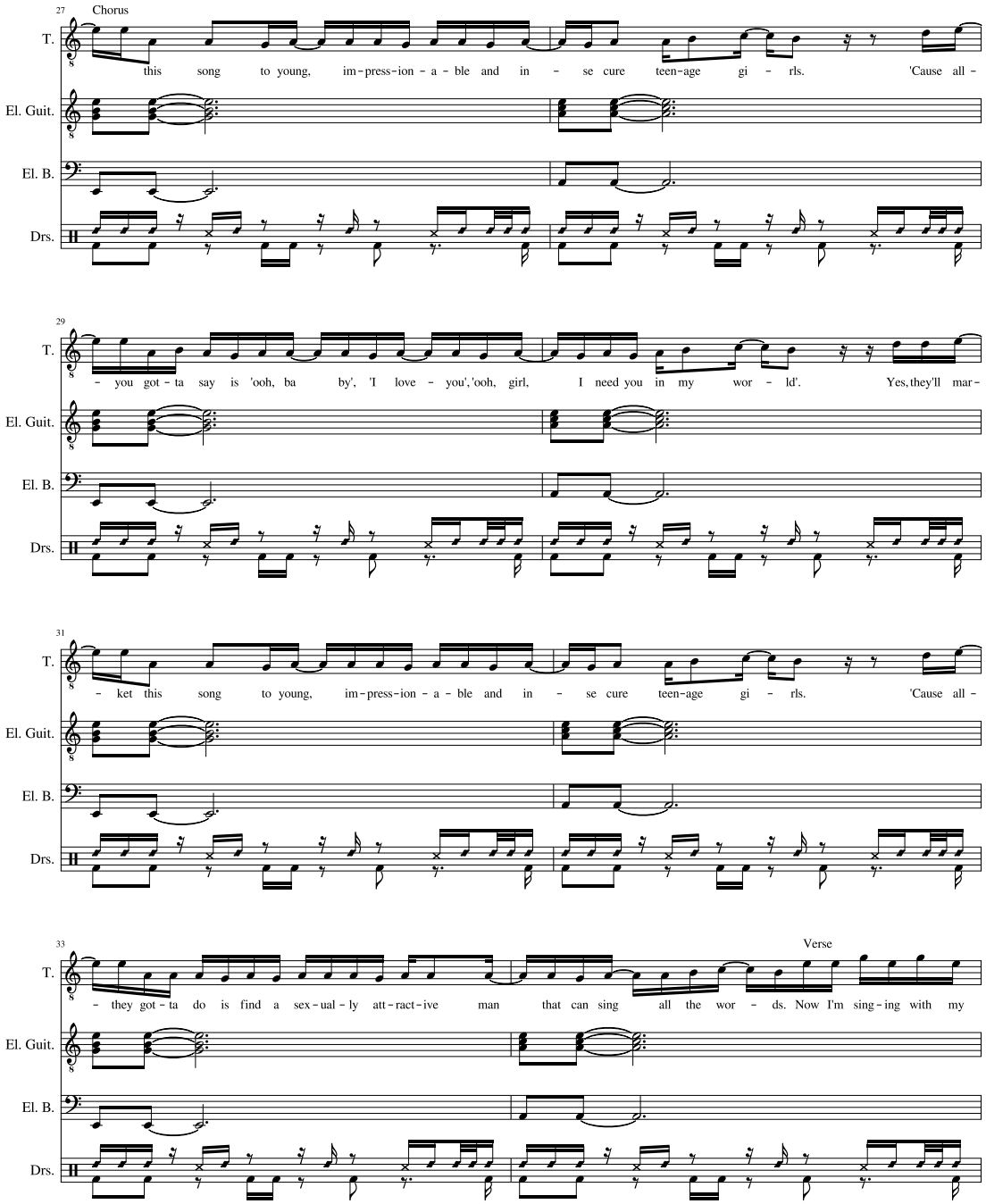
# Pop Song

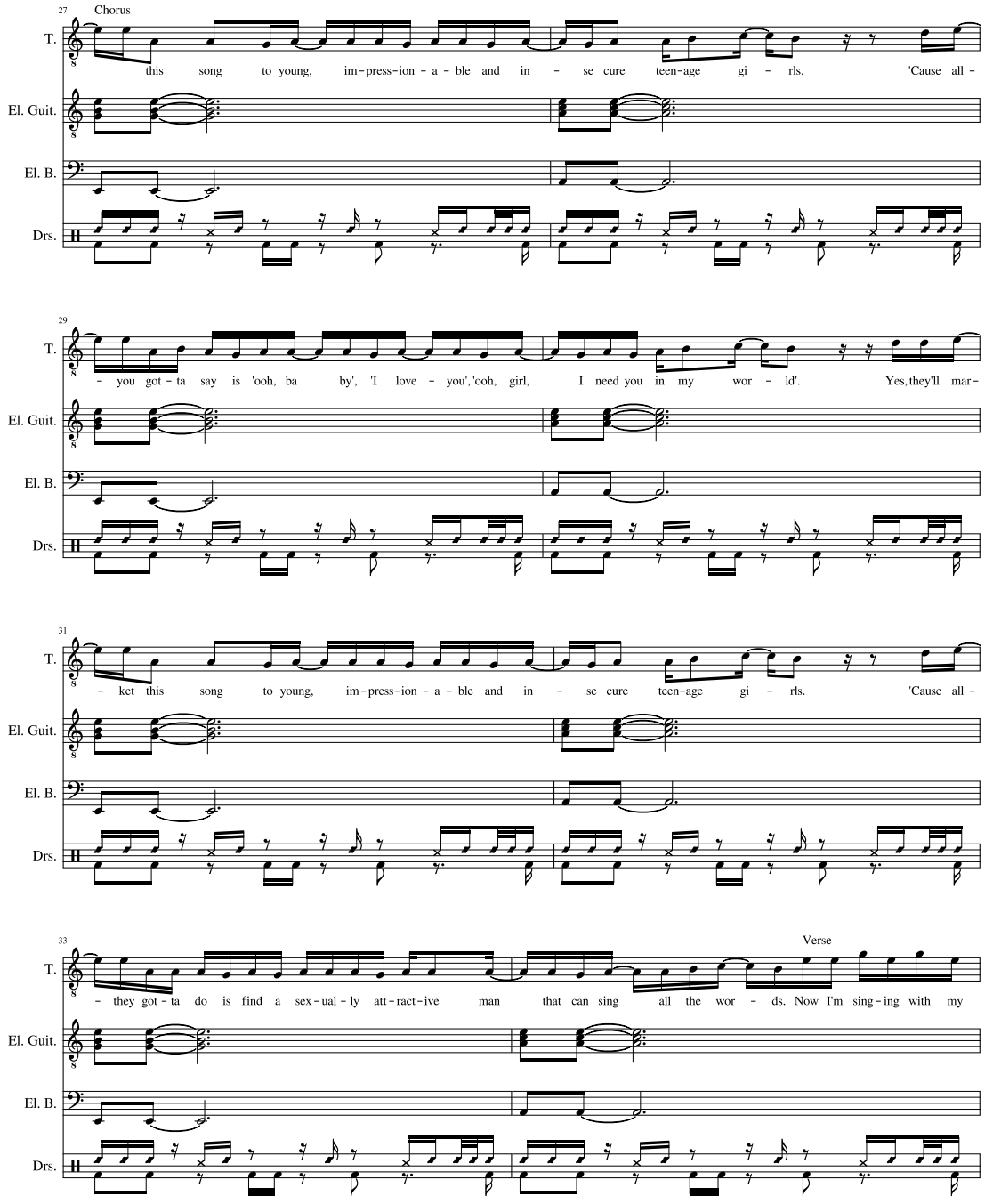
Jon Lajoie

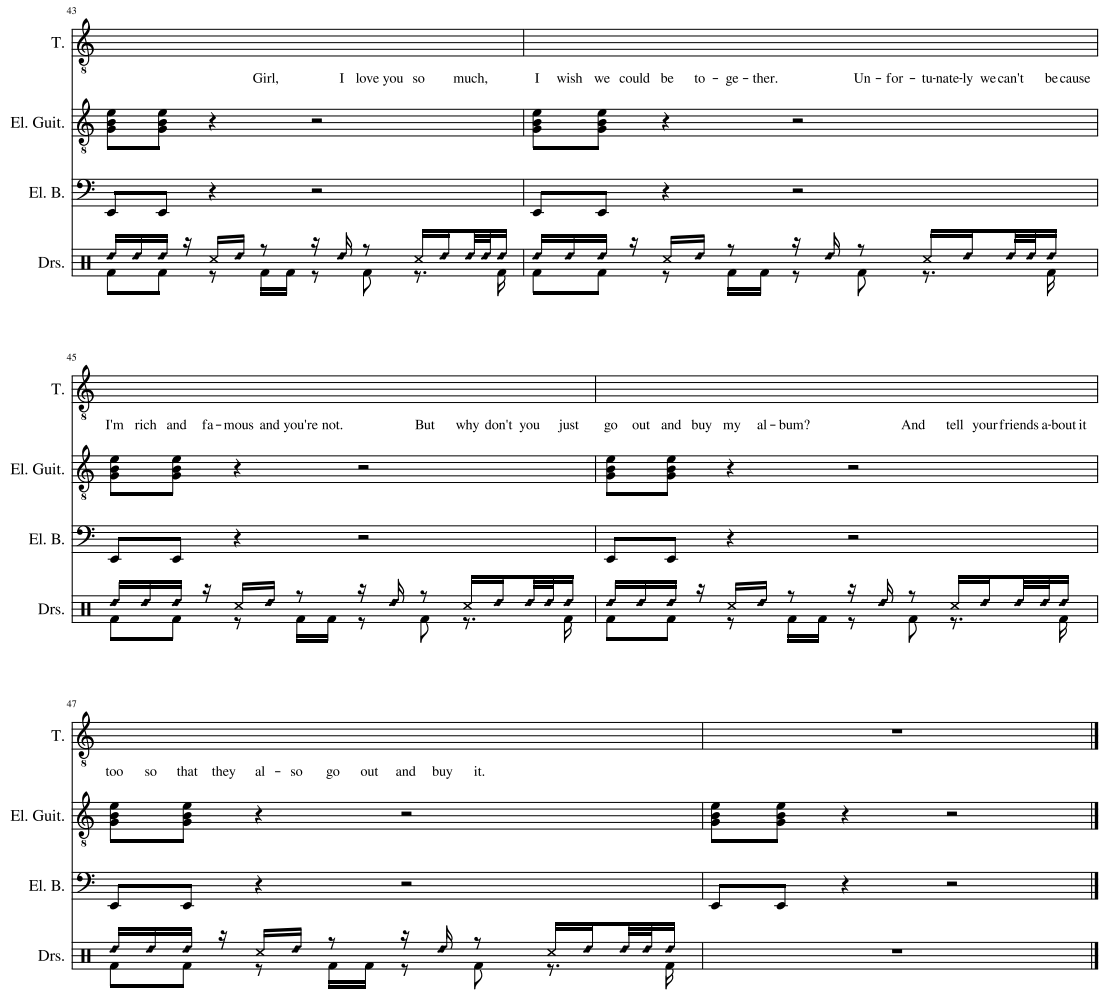



10
(percussion 'swoosh') Chorus
T.
gon na go plat-i-nu-um-. 'Cause they'll mar - ket this song to young, im press ion-a-ble and in - se cure teen age gi - rls. 'Cause all-
El. Guit.
El. B.
Drs.
13
T.
- you got - ta say is 'ooh, ba by', 'I love - you', 'ooh, girl, I need you in my wor - ld'. Yes, they'll mar-
El. Guit.
El. B.
Drs.
15
T.
- ket this song to young, im-press-ion - a - ble and in - se cure teen-age gi - rls. 'Cause all -
El. Guit.
El. B.
Drs.
17
Rap verse
T.
- they got - ta do is find a sex - ual - ly att - ract - ive man that can sing all the wor - ds. And now the to - ken
El. Guit.
El. B.
Drs.


19
T.
rap verse that does n't make a - ny sense but helps to get a small per - cent - age of the ur - ban mu - sic mar - ket
El. Guit.
El. B.
Drs.
21
T.
Hey ba - by, ba - by, I can tell that you are cra - zy, cra - zy. Shake that ass, girl, my rhymes are get - ting la - zy, la - zy.
El. Guit.
El. B.
Drs.
23
T.
The things I'm talk - ing 'bout have no thing to do with the song, ba - by. But it don't mat - ter, won't you show me that thong, ba - by?
El. Guit.
El. B.
Drs.
25
'Cause they'll mar - ket
T.
That's how it works in the pop mu - sic in - dus - try, Two thou - sand ten, moth - er fuck - er, that's just how it be
El. Guit.
El. B.
Drs.


27
Chorus
T.
this song to young, im-press-ion-a-ble and in - se cure teen-age gi - rls. 'Cause all -
El. Guit.
El. B.
Drs.
29
T.
- you got-ta say is 'ooh, ba by', 'I love - you','ooh, girl, I need you in my wor - ld'. Yes,they'll mar-
El. Guit.
El. B.
Drs.
31
T.
- ket this song to young, im-press-ion-a-ble and in - se cure teen-age gi - rls. 'Cause all -
El. Guit.
El. B.
Drs.
33
Verse
T.
- they got-ta do is find a sex-ual-ly att-ract-ive man that can sing all the wor - ds. Now I'm sing-ing with my
El. Guit.
El. B.
Drs.


27
Chorus
T.
this song to young, im-press-ion-a-ble and in-se cure teen-age gi-rls. 'Cause all-
El. Guit.
El. B.
Drs.
29
T.
-you got-ta say is 'ooh, ba by', 'I love-you', 'ooh, girl, I need you in my wor-ld'. Yes, they'll mar-
El. Guit.
El. B.
Drs.
31
T.
-ket this song to young, im-press-ion-a-ble and in-se cure teen-age gi-rls. 'Cause all-
El. Guit.
El. B.
Drs.
33
Verse
T.
-they got-ta do is find a sex-ual-ly att-ract-ive man that can sing all the wor-ds. Now I'm sing-ing with my
El. Guit.
El. B.
Drs.




Example 5.16. *'Pop Song' full score (transcription by author)*

If the parodies by Da Vinci's Notebook and Axis of Awesome show boy band pop at its most inventive, 'Pop Song' does the opposite by using a musical structure that is simpler than even the most banal pop songs. As Example 5.16 shows, the harmony oscillates between just two chords, E minor and A minor, and the texture remains sparse throughout the song. The only contrasts in accompaniment between the different sections of the song is that the chords are sustained for longer in the chorus compared to the verse, and the timbral quality of the guitar sound shifts slightly.[43] As the score shows, the percussion section does not vary its pattern throughout the whole song. The incessantly repetitive minor harmony, along with the slow tempo of 68 bpm, means that the song is not especially pleasant to listen to; in contrast to the forward momentum of

[43] The score cannot be considered an entirely adequate representation of the song because it does not include differences in timbre. Timbral variation in 'Pop Song', however, is minimal: the shift in guitar sound is the only notable contrast.

'How to Write a Love Song, the music of 'Pop Song' seems as though it is stuck in a rut, thus adding to the aura of cynicism that is communicated through the lyrics. Although the melody differs in each verse, the musical structure of 'Pop Song' is much less complex than either 'How to Write a Love Song' or 'Title of the Song'. This gives the impression that Lajoie has created a song which is as banal as he could manage, while making sure that it still sounds like a pop song.

Although the visuals and lyrics suggest Lajoie's target of parody to be a boy band song, this is not reflected in the music, which includes no specific references to the 90s and 2000s boy band style; there is no elevating modulation, for example. The song simply sounds—as the title suggests—like a generic pop song. The rap verse featured in the song is not usually heard in boy band music, though it became a common feature of mainstream pop songs in the late 2000s and early 2010s. Much chart pop of the last decade is characterised by a mixture of EDM (Electronic Dance Music) and hip hop influences. Singer-songwriters routinely collaborate with rappers on hit songs: artists who released such music around the same time as 'Pop Song' include Akon and Usher, while those such as Ed Sheeran continued the trend into the late 2010s. A line from 'Pop Song's rap verse—'That's how it works in the pop music industry/2010, motherfucker, that's just how it be'—historically situates the musical style in 2010, rather than in the earlier decades when boy bands dominated. This—along with the generic 'pop song' aesthetic described above—implies that the target of Lajoie's critique is wider than just the boy band. It encompasses several trends in mainstream (and manufactured) pop, from boy bands to the solo artists who took over in the charts as the primary performers of banal love songs. 'Pop Song' can thus be interpreted as an attack on the idea of manufactured pop, rather than on a specific kind of pop. While other pop parodists satirise a specific genre of music (or even target specific artists, such as Axis of Awesome's references to Boyz II Men), Lajoie's parody consists of an amalgam of several different musical and visual symbols that listeners associate with 'manufactured pop'. (This is consistent with Lajoie's approach to musical parody, in which he makes fun of general musical phenomena and figures—for example, the white rapper—rather than specific artists.) That Lajoie chose to pair this generic pop music with a video that clearly depicts a boy band, however, suggests that the boy band is the clearest symbol of manufactured pop that is widely recognised by an audience. We can acknowledge that there might be good reason for this; the presentation of a boy band's image is usually highly influenced by commercial factors. Nevertheless, 'Pop Song' serves as a reminder that the boy band is not the only pop music format that is perceived as manufactured.

The 'Pop Song' video aptly demonstrates how parody can work to bolster an ideologically suspect position even while ostensibly critiquing it. The video is set in a nightclub and shows the mock boy band adored by young female fans. Conventionally

attractive, scantily clad young women dance along to Lajoie's performance, grinding and twerking in a sexually suggestive manner. This is presumably intended as an ironic critique of the persistent sexualisation of women in the pop music industry. Turning this on its head, however, we can observe that the tongue-in-cheek, satirical context provides even the most enlightened feminist viewers with a free pass to enjoy this overt display of female objectification. In his 2014 blog post on Lily Allen's ostensibly feminist pop song 'Hard Out Here', J. P. E. Harper-Scott observes not only how the instant gratification provided by the unchallenging musical structure dilutes the potency of the lyrics' critique of patriarchal values, but also how the video's 'satirical' presentation of sexualising images of women further undermines this message. Harper-Scott comments that 'the interaction of music and video does little more than provide the ideologically normal objectification of women with a nice reassurance that it's ironic, so we can feel good about ourselves while nothing at all is changed […] If it gives you a hardon, it's OK: it's a feminist hardon!'[44] This analysis applies equally to Lajoie's 'ironic' objectification of women in 'Pop Song'. In this context such laughter can serve to mask the ideological reinforcement of pop music's sexism, thus curtailing the parody's potential for effective critique. Žižek's observation (set out in Chapter 2) that laughter can serve to affirm the target of satire, thus constituting the opposite of critique, is here vindicated.

Lajoie's mild homophobia, as demonstrated in both 'Pop Song' and 'Radio Friendly Song' (which will be analysed below), functions in the same way as his mild sexism. In 'Pop Song' Lajoie, playing the effeminate boy band member, mocks the perceived connection between gay men, high-pitched voices, and emotional sensitivity, singing in a tongue-in-cheek fashion: 'Now I'm singing in my gay voice to let you know that I am sensitive'. But does this serve to reinforce such stereotyping even while purporting to critique it? In 'Radio Friendly Song' Lajoie uses the terms 'gay' and 'cock-sucking' as pejorative descriptors to emphasise how bad the song is: 'I'm not homophobic but this song is so fucking gay' and 'they want another stupid, motherfucking, lame, cock-sucking, cookie-cutter radio-friendly song'. The addition of this supposedly self-reflexive 'I'm not homophobic but…' is presumably intended to cancel out the offensive homophobic slur, but it can be argued that self-aware 'ironic' homophobia still constitutes homophobia, and that the use of 'gay' or 'cock-sucking' (implying that to such a cock is degrading) as pejoratives, in any context, must always be regressive.

[44] J. P. E. Harper-Scott, 'Brief Thoughts on Lily Allen', *J. P. E. Harper-Scott* (blog), 4 January 2014, https://jpehs.co.uk/2014/01/04/brief-thoughts-on-lily-allen/.

## 5.6 Jon Lajoie: 'Radio Friendly Song'

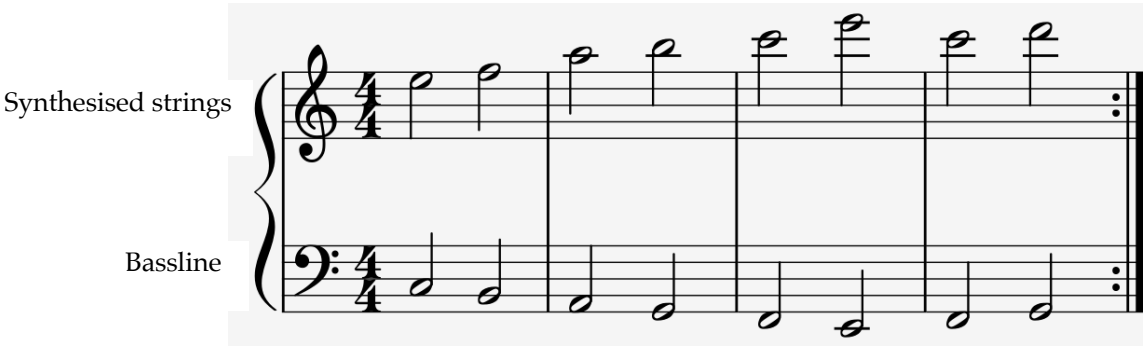
Like 'Pop Song', Lajoie's other parody song that critiques mainstream pop, 'Radio Friendly Song', exaggerates the perceived banality of its target. All its musical features seem to have been chosen for the purpose of their tedious and cliched nature. The song takes a simple verse-chorus form, with a brief bridge before the final chorus. The key is C major, the most popular choice for mainstream pop songs: it stands for the default, the conventional, the easy option.[45] Like 'Pop Song', the instrumentation is relatively sparse—consisting only of vocals, piano, drums and a synthesiser strings effect—yet not to the extent that this sparseness draws attention to itself. The tempo is a slow 66 bpm, causing the song to drag. The harmony in the verse takes the most popular progression I-V-vi–IV, while the chorus departs from this structure and uses a progression based on Pachelbel's Canon: as Table 5.5 demonstrates, almost all the chords coincide in each work.

| **Pachelbel's Canon** | **Radio Friendly Song (chorus)** |
|---|---|
| I | I |
| V | V7/vii |
| vi | vi |
| iii | vi/V |
| IV | IV |
| I | I/iii |
| IV | IV |
| V | V |

Table 5.5. *Comparison of harmony in Pachelbel's Canon and 'Radio Friendly Song' (chorus)*

The sequence drives to repeat itself; Pachelbel's Canon is after all known for its continuous repetition of this chord progression throughout the work. In the chorus of 'Radio Friendly Song' the pattern features only twice. As Example 5.17 shows, the chorus bassline moves by descending stepwise motion from the tonic C down to E, before turning back in on itself and coming to rest on the dominant G. It then returns to C to repeat the sequence.

[45] As Chapter 5 noted, C major is the most popular key for mainstream pop songs.




Example 5.17. *'Radio Friendly Song' chorus: synthesised strings and bassline (transcription by author)*

This is the same intervallic pattern as the upper string part in bars 5-8 of Pachelbel's Canon, as shown in Example 5.18.

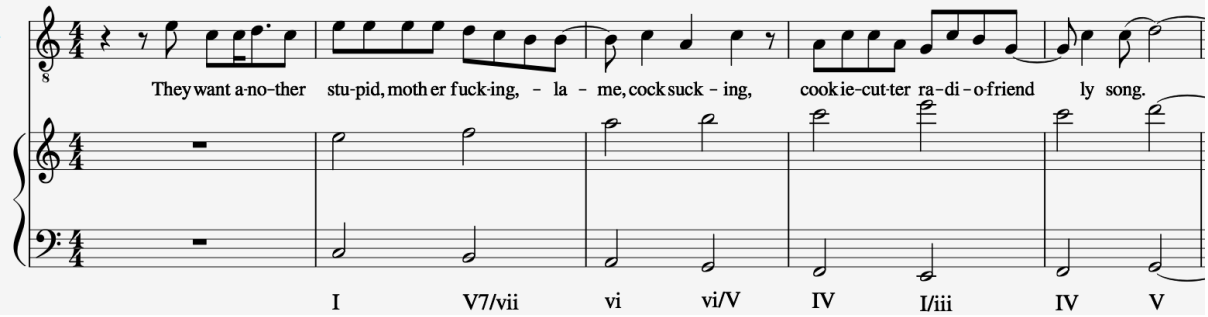
Example 5.18. *Pachelbel's Canon string line (excerpt; transcription by author)*

In the chorus of 'Radio Friendly Song' the synthesised strings and the bassline work together to form a circular pattern: both move away from each other in contrary motion, before turning back towards each other in the final bar of the phrase (see Example 5.17). This creates the effect of an infinitely repetitive closed circuit. As the sequence churns round and round, the listener is permitted no escape from the tonic, which is incessantly pounded by the insistent return from V to I when the sequence repeats. The familiar sense of tonal claustrophobia that characterises much mainstream pop music is here evoked. The song's repetition, along with its tonic saturation, creates a *jouissance*-like sensation of compulsive excess, comparable to hitting oneself over the head with a mallet, yet without any desire to stop.[46]

Whether deliberate or not, the reference to Pachelbel's Canon is highly appropriate in the context of 'Radio Friendly Song'. Pachelbel's work is a 'radio-friendly' classical work which one would expect to hear on Classic FM and other commercial or light classical radio stations. Its wide popularity, indicated by its frequent use at occasions such as weddings, for example, has led to its unfortunately having gained a reputation for cliché and even banality. 'Radio Friendly Song's aesthetic banality does not prevent

[46] In Lacanian theory *jouissance* can be defined as finding pleasure in pain, or of going beyond the pleasure principle to reach a state of pain. See Sean Homer, *Jacques Lacan* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005), 88–91.

it from being extremely catchy.[47] Pachelbel's Canon is also notably catchy—and the reference to the Canon in the chorus (along with the descending melodic sequence that works alongside the harmonic pattern, as shown in Example 5.19) is the part of 'Radio Friendly Song' that functions most like an earworm.




Example 5.19. *'Radio Friendly Song' chorus (excerpt; transcription by author)*

Several other elements of 'Radio Friendly Song' indicate Lajoie's deliberate attempt to produce 'bad' music. While the lyrics are amusing, they are not especially clever. Lajoie's frequent use of insults laced with expletives might be considered a rather lazy device. The lyrics mostly draw attention to the banality of the music:

> It starts off like a thousand other songs that you've heard before,
> Except in this one they do a little do do do do do do do do.
> So you try to change the station but it's playing on every one,
> A bunch of shitty-ass chords and lyrics recorded by a fucking moron.
>
> And you assume that the general public is not that stupid.
> You're positive that nobody will want to listen to this,
> But you are wrong.
>
> They want another stupid, motherfucking, lame, cock-sucking,
> Cookie-cutter radio-friendly song.
> And everyone sings along in their cars and at the mall,
> And at the office they all love the new radio-friendly song.

The strained quality of Lajoie's voice suggests the song is intended to sound unpolished. The singing is sometimes flat, particularly in the chorus, which is in a higher register

[47] On the song's YouTube page, several listeners comment on its catchiness. JonLajoie, *Radio Friendly Song*.

than the verse. While Lajoie's voice is certainly not terrible, neither is it especially pleasant to listen to. The impression that Lajoie is an amateur singing along to the song might be seen to reflect the importance of a 'radio-friendly' song being easy to sing along to, a function which is observed in the lyrics and the video: 'And everyone sings along in their cars and at the mall' is accompanied by images of people singing along to the song in a car and at a shopping mall. In songs produced with his sincere folk-pop project Wolfie's Just Fine, Lajoie takes more care with his singing, with a clear intention of producing a pleasant sound.[48] His vocal proficiency here indicates that he made a deliberate choice not to showcase this in 'Radio Friendly Song'. In 'Pop Song', Lajoie implies that it is not necessary for pop stars to possess a high-quality voice in order to produce a chart hit, suggesting that physical appearance is a more important quality in a pop star than vocal ability: ''Cause all they gotta do is find a sexually attractive man that can sing all the words'. The liberal use of autotune in 'Pop Song' vindicates this notion; in 'Radio Friendly Song', Lajoie simply portrays bad singing in order to demonstrate this point.

More than any of the parodies analysed in this chapter, 'Radio Friendly Song' particularly targets audiences for their bad musical taste. Discussing the lists compiled by rock critics of 'the worst records ever made', Frith observes that 'the critical contempt seems less for the recordings than for the people who like them, who take them seriously'.[49] In 'Radio Friendly Song', Lajoie's smug—and indeed, contemptuous—attitude comes through in the positioning of himself as knowing compared with the people who like this kind of music.

In its deliberate embracing of 'bad' music, 'Radio Friendly Song' (and to an extent, 'Pop Song') thus stands in contrast to both 'Title of the Song' and 'How to Write a Love Song'. Lajoie takes care to construct a song which—somewhat ironically—sounds as though it has been produced with the minimum amount of care possible. While the clever positioning of the subject in the lyrics of 'Title of the Song' and the musical details in 'How to Write a Love Song' render these parodies more credible than many love songs in the charts, 'Radio Friendly Song' has no such redeeming features. In its stark aesthetic banality and single-minded delivery of its message—'this kind of music is bad; those who listen to it are stupid'—'Radio Friendly Song' constitutes, in a certain sense, a minimalist parody. Its meaning is clear from the outset: there are no surprising twists and turns, nor complex interaction between the respective subject-positions of knowingness and ignorance, as are present in The Conchords' 'Think About It'. Lajoie

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[48] See, for example, JonLajoie, *Wolfie's Just Fine - It's a Job (Official Music Video)*, accessed 15 May 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LZ5UsXXmnb4.

[49] Simon Frith, 'What Is Bad Music?', in Washburne and Derno, eds., *Bad Music: The Music We Love to Hate*, 19.

makes the target of his disdain quite clear, explicitly lambasting those who listen to mainstream pop as not-in-the-know. Unlike the good-natured parodies of Axis of Awesome and Da Vinci's Notebook, Lajoie communicates a sense of anger regarding the existence (and success) of mainstream pop. His anger is pure and unadulterated; he is not interested in making concessions for the seemingly more credible examples of mainstream music. The directness of Lajoie's critique is heightened by the fact that he does not combine it with any other form of social commentary: unlike the other parodies analysed (including 'Pop Song') the attack on mainstream aesthetics is not combined with other messages concerning race or gender politics.

There is an argument to be made that the purely musical nature of Lajoie's critique lessens its force by rendering it an insubstantial work of satire. Unlike 'Pop Song', 'Radio Friendly Song' does not include critique of the wider economic and ideological structure which cultivates the popularity of this kind of banal music. Rather, Lajoie simply sounds like he is bored and angered by this music *as music.* 'Radio Friendly Song' can be interpreted as an indulgent valve for Lajoie to let off steam about the music that he hates.[50] The release of 'Radio Friendly Song' alongside 'Pop Song' also shows Lajoie tapping into a market for parodic songs which critique mainstream pop. Lajoie produces multiple songs whose object of critique is very similar. His 2014 video 'Please Use This Song', which uses generic yet extremely catchy music to poke fun at the use of mainstream pop songs in television advertising, constitutes a further addition to the artist's broad critique of the commercial lucrativeness of mainstream pop.[51] But in producing these parodies, Lajoie has found a lucrative market of his own. Each of these songs—'Pop Song', 'Radio Friendly Song' and 'Please Use This Song'—has over five million YouTube views. Lajoie delivers multiple parodies of mainstream pop to his audience, just as the major record labels churn out multiple hit songs for their audiences to consume. The ironic paradox here is of a similar nature to Gaye's attempt to disseminate a political message through commercial music, as well as white rappers' critique of cultural appropriation through producing hit songs: the more Lajoie profits from the popularity of his parodies, the closer his socio-economic position becomes to those of the mainstream artists he purports to critique.[52]

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[50] At the end of the video, after he has sung the final line of the song, Lajoie shakes his head resignedly and says, 'god, I hate this shit'.

[51] JonLajoie, *Please Use This Song (Jon Lajoie)*, accessed 13 July 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PuQt9N4Dsok.

[52] Lajoie's tendency to produce multiple parodies that all have the same function is also apparent in his 'Everyday Normal Guy' trilogy: he has released 'Everyday Normal Guy', 'Everyday Normal Guy 2' and 'Everyday Normal Crew'. Lajoie is self-reflexive about this; in 'Everyday Normal Crew' he mentions the fact that he repeats material from the previous two songs.

### 5.6.1 'Radio Friendly Song's Parodic Stance: Critical Comparisons

It could be argued that the sparseness—in several senses—of 'Radio Friendly Song' renders it not only a 'bad' song, but also a 'bad' parody. So obviously does it lack the rich complexity of a satirical work such as 'Think About It' that it might be considered a lazy effort in comparison. On the other hand, we can observe that producing a song which is deliberately bad is not so easy as it might appear. Indeed, the type of parody which 'Radio Friendly Song' constitutes—a parody which critiques an object for its aesthetic banality while itself constituting an artwork that is just as banal—is in fact relatively rare. In its parodic stance, 'Radio Friendly Song':

a) parodies both the form and content of the object;
b) conveys the message that the object is aesthetically 'bad';
c) itself constitutes an aesthetically 'bad' work of art.

It is unusual to find a parody that fulfils all three criteria. Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* satirised both the form and content of a gothic novel in an effort to critique the clichés of the genre. Austen did this, however, through well-crafted literature, producing a work which is of no noticeably worse quality than her more sincere novels (despite how critics might have dismissed *Northanger Abbey). Northanger Abbey* thus fulfils criteria a) and b), but not c). In the so-called 'Sokal hoax', the physics professor Alan Sokal published a spoof article in a cultural studies journal, imitating what Sokal perceived to be obscure postmodern scholarship which incorrectly draws on scientific research in order to bolster the claims of the humanities scholar. As a parodic text, the hoax is comparable to 'Radio Friendly Song' in that it: a) takes the form of a journal article and parodies the content of postmodern humanities scholarship; b) conveys the message that this kind of scholarship is 'bad'; and c) itself constitutes 'bad' scholarship. The Sokal hoax aimed to draw attention to 'bad' postmodern scholarship (and bad academic practice) and make fun of those who read and admire it, just as 'Radio Friendly Song' targets 'bad' mainstream music and pokes fun at those who consume it.

The Californian punk rock band NOFX have produced a number of songs that poke fun at the tropes of the musical genre of which they are a part. 'Please Play this Song on the Radio', released in 1992, parodies the mainstream tendencies of punk rock, and almost fulfils the same criteria as 'Radio Friendly Song': it parodies both the form and content of punk rock; critiques the banal aesthetic tropes of the genre; and itself might be considered to constitute an aesthetically 'bad' song.

We wrote this song, it's not too short, it's not too long
It's got back up vocals in just the right places
It's got a few oohs and ahhs
And it takes a little pause
Just before I sing the F-word
Please play this song on the radio

Almost every line is sung in time
Almost every verse ends in a rim
The only problem we had was writing
Enough words
Ooh, aah
But that's okay, because the chorus is
Coming up again now
Please play this song on the radio
Please play this song on the radio

Like 'How to Write a Love Song', NOFX's lyrics are self-referential, describing their own function. They are accompanied by musical gestures that the band perceives to be clichés of punk rock, including vacuous guitar solos and harmonising backup vocals. As with 'Radio Friendly Song', NOFX's focus on the idea of a song suitable for radio broadcast serves as shorthand for a critique of the mainstream tendencies of a musical genre. The band critiques the standardisation of pop music which they perceive to be encouraged by radio stations (especially commercial ones) that impose constraints on a song's length, for example. If an original song exceeds the acceptable playing time for radio broadcast, it is cut down to a 'radio edit' to render it suitable. The radio edit of Timberlake's 'What Goes Around' cuts out the secondary s.II section altogether, reducing the song's length from around seven minutes to an apparently more palatable five minutes. A 'radio-friendly' song is required to grab the listener's attention and lodge itself in the listener's memory after just one hearing, which means that it should be catchy and repetitive. Songs for radio broadcast should end either with a fade-out, over which the DJ can talk, or a distinct ending, so that the DJ can be certain the song has finished before they begin their introduction to the next track. NOFX mockingly subvert this need for a clear point of closure by including a fake ending on their satirical track. Following a final-sounding chord that marks the end of what appears to be the last chorus, there is a short silence, after which the song begins again with:

Right about this time
Some shit head will be drawing a fat fucking line
Over the title on the back sleeve, what an asshole

So Mr. DJ I hope you've already made your segue
Or the FCC's gonna take a shit right on your head
Can't play this song on the radio
Can't play this song on the radio

Ending the song with a mocking 'can't play this song on the radio' is a nod to the fact that the song's false ending actually renders it unsuitable for radio broadcast.

NOFX's parody is set apart from Lajoie's in that the former critiques the genre of punk rock from an insider's perspective, while the latter targets a type of music of which he is not a part. Like Lajoie, however, NOFX targets the dominance of the mainstream from a position of relative independence. As punk rock gained mainstream attention in the 1990s, several bands—including The Offspring and Green Day—signed to major labels, but NOFX always remained with independent labels. The band has also resisted standardisation in terms of song length by producing several tracks which are less than a minute in length, while their longest track, 'The Decline', lasts 18 minutes 20 seconds. The attitude of 'Please Play This Song on the Radio', however, is certainly more loving and playful than 'Radio Friendly Song'.

Although 'Radio Friendly Song' functions primarily as a critique of mainstream music in general, and does not contain specific references to any particular artist or genre (the only requisite is that the music be 'radio-friendly'), its musical style is closest to that of singer-songwriter and soft rock music from the 2000s, by artists such as Daniel Powter, James Morrison, and James Blunt, and bands such as One Republic, Keane, Coldplay, and The Fray. This is the kind of easy-listening pop music that is broadcast on Adult Contemporary radio stations. It has only vague genre affiliations; there are no music-stylistic features which distinguish it from the mainstream, because it does not tend to stray from mainstream norms. The genre of 'singer-songwriter' is particularly vague; it should perhaps be considered more of a format than a genre. All that 'singer-songwriter' music requires is a solo artist accompanying themselves on the guitar or piano (though there may also be other instruments involved). Aside from this, the musical style can vary widely depending on the artist. The kind of music parodied by 'Radio Friendly Song' is thus itself rather devoid of substance. It is also worth noting that the singer-songwriter format is commonly perceived as more authentic than other genres of pop, and certainly compared with boy band music. Singer-songwriter music implies immediate, direct expression from a single author who both writes and performs the song, and both sings and plays an instrument, thus having more creative control over the music. These are all things which are valued highly according to rock ideology. This serves as a reminder that any genre of pop music can be perceived as banal and pandering to mainstream tastes—not only boy band or 'manufactured' pop. 'Radio Friendly Song' and 'Please Play This Song on the Radio' both critique the banality of

genres which are perceived to be credible and authentic: singer-songwriter and punk rock respectively.

'Radio Friendly Song' challenges our conceptions about what makes a good work of parody, and what makes a good work of art—for which the criteria are not necessarily the same. Lajoie succeeds in imitating a banal song, but does this mean that the parody itself is banal? Often, works of parody are appealing and enjoyable partly due to the richness of their meaning. It is difficult for a parody to be banal, even if it wants to be, because its status as parody means that it has meaning from the outset in the dialogue it enters into with the original text that it targets. One of the most straightforward ways in which art creates meaning is by doing something new or original (however that might be defined). But parody is by its nature a derivative form; it is both derived from and in dialogue with the original text. The depth of a parody's meaning thus depends upon both the nature of its dialogue with the original text and the extent to which its own aesthetics constitute something new.

It could be argued that a parody is most enjoyable and effective when the complete extent of its meaning is not obvious from the outset. The Conchords' 'Think About It' requires the listener to uncover several layers of meaning order to fully grasp the parody's intent. Judged by these standards, 'Radio Friendly Song' is not a good parody, and might even be called a lazy parody. Compared with 'How to Write a Love Song' or 'Title of the Song', its meaning is not as rich, it does not contain as many layers to uncover, and its critical attitude presents itself immediately on the surface. On the other hand, we can argue that 'Radio Friendly Song' is an effective parody precisely because its very banality constitutes its meaning; Lajoie manages to conjure meaning from banality. We might further suggest that the creation of a song which is *deliberately* bad requires a considerable command of one's craft, and that an artist who produced such a work might deserve more credit than if he had produced a sincere song that just happens to be bad. Given that parody is usually considered something to be enjoyed, it is perhaps an impressive feat to produce a song which has all the attributes of parody, yet which is not particularly enjoyable to listen to.

## 5.7 Conclusion

This chapter has set out two distinct approaches to parodying boy band and mainstream pop. First, the songs by Da Vinci's Notebook and Axis of Awesome are creative parodies which appear to show boy band/R&B pop at its best. This affords several different critical interpretations. The songs might constitute loving parody; or they might be considered to show up boy band/R&B music by doing this music better than many sincere artists. The racial dynamics implicated in the parody further complicate this

critique. The parodies might constitute a straightforward dismissal of black music; or they might be seen to target R&B specifically for its inauthenticity within the context of black genres. The ambiguous meaning of 'How to Write a Love Song' and 'Title of the Song' parallels the love-hate relationship many listeners and critics have with sincere mainstream and manufactured pop music. The second approach to the parodying of mainstream pop analysed in this chapter is demonstrated by Lajoie's 'Pop Song' and 'Radio Friendly Song', whose cynical banality show the music at its worst, and lambast audiences along the way. Lajoie's output is shown to complicate received notions of authenticity and artistry in both 'sincere' music and parody, thus opening up a new critical perspective which has hitherto been overlooked.

The songs assessed in this chapter thus all espouse different critical attitudes towards their object of parody. If we imagine a scale that measures the level of vitriol directed at their targets, Da Vinci's Notebook's 'Title of the Song' would place at the end which is least scathing, Lajoie's 'Pop Song' and 'Radio Friendly Song' would be at the opposite end, while Axis of Awesome's 'How to Write a Love Song' would fall somewhere in between these two poles (though perhaps a little closer to the 'affectionate' end). 'Title of the Song' and 'How to Write a Love Song' are relatively kind towards their objects of satire; the stylistic features of these parodies lend them an affinity with the kinds of boy band and mainstream music that are often considered to be the most credible. Lajoie's parodies, on the other hand, not only have lyrics which explicitly attack their objects of satire, but they also exaggerate the banality of the music targeted. From a certain perspective, this suggests that Lajoie's attack on mainstream pop is more scathing—and more robust—than that presented by either Da Vinci's Notebook or Axis of Awesome.

In works of parody, critique of the original target is often allowed to remain ambiguous. Da Vinci's Notebook and Axis of Awesome, for example, are neither totally critical nor totally uncritical of boy band pop. Their parody songs reflect and draw attention to the often paradoxical and complex relationship many listeners have with mainstream pop, which can be described as 'love-hate'. Satirising boy band pop (and other forms of mainstream pop) might be intended as a critique of capitalism, but this critique can only ever be indirect. This thesis has demonstrated that boy band pop signifies more than just a corrupt tool of the capitalist system: it also functions as an outlet for the sexual fantasies of teenage girls, and affords pleasure to listeners (whether this pleasure is guilty or genuine, and whether ethical or unethical—although we know such judgements are by no means straightforward). This means that, even in the case of Lajoie's 'Radio Friendly Song' and 'Pop Song', critique of this kind of music can never be straightforward.

Another feature of Lajoie's parodies which might suggest an increase in their critical potential is the distance they maintain from their targets of satire. Compared with those by Da Vinci's Notebook and Axis of Awesome, Lajoie's parodies do not show such an intricate knowledge of specific references to boy bands or other mainstream artists. In their choice not to refer to specific bands or songs, Lajoie's songs stand at a remove from the format in a way that the other parody songs do not. Crucially, 'Pop Song' and 'Radio Friendly Song' do not require the audience to possess specific knowledge of 'sincere' pop artists in order to 'get' the parody. Only a vague familiarity with mainstream pop (which most western listeners will possess, whether they like it or not) is all that is required to understand these parodies. This stands in contrast to 'How to Write a Love Song', in which the parody is enriched by the audience's knowledge of Boyz II Men videos. It can be argued that a closeness to the parodied genre, such as that demonstrated by Axis of Awesome, not only implies a certain level of affection for it, but also encourages the audience to consume boy band pop in order to more fully understand the parodic references. Lajoie's songs, in contrast, do not encourage the listener to do this, because they are less derivative than those by Da Vinci's Notebook and Axis of Awesome, and less reliant on references to their targets of satire.

We can further argue that the critical potential of 'Title of the Song' and 'How to Write a Love Song' is diluted, because in refusing to show boy band pop at its worst, and by adding an enjoyable humorous element, they make this music bearable for listeners who might otherwise find it to be insufferable. In Chapter 2 I set out Žižek's argument that ironic distance, and the 'liberating laughter' that it affords, function as a way to cope with the horrors of society. It can be argued that all the parodies analysed (even those by Lajoie) fulfil this function to an extent, but this applies especially to Da Vinci's Notebook and Axis of Awesome, because not only do their parodies elicit laughter, but their musical aesthetics are also enjoyable, as if to say: 'we're going to parody boy band pop so that you can make fun of it and laugh, though we're not going to force you to listen to the most banal kind of boy band pop, but the OK pop that is good to listen to'. We can thus argue that these parody songs, in poking fun at something 'bad', allow the listener to think a) that this 'bad' thing isn't so bad after all, because it permits the critique, and b) that actually the 'bad' thing isn't actually all that bad on its own terms, because it has redeeming features. The outcome is that the parody here functions a little more than an advertisement for the 'bad' music that it purports to critique. As Žižek observes, even if we do something with a stance of ironic distance, we are still doing the thing, and this is what counts.

It must be noted, however, that by the measure of Paddison's interpretation of Adorno's theory set out earlier in the chapter, Lajoie's songs fail to hold up as examples of 'critical' music. In critiquing music which is banal and empty by producing a work

that is likewise banal and empty, his works cannot be considered 'critical', because they do nothing to resist their commodified nature. The rich parodic references in 'How to Write a Love Song' and 'Title of the Song', as well as the multiple and complex layers of self-reflexivity in The Conchords' 'Think About It', on the other hand, might render these more 'critical' works of art (according to Paddison's definition) than Lajoie's straightforward imitations of banality.

As I have already suggested, however, most parody songs do not fall neatly into Paddison's categories of 'critical' or 'uncritical' art. Parody songs are both 'objective' and 'subjective'. On one hand, they accept their fate as a commodity, by being banal (or imitating banality), consumable, and enjoyable. On the other hand, they step outside of this objective state and present a critique of their object of parody (and, by extension, of themselves) even while mirroring it. Parody songs are thus able to accept their status as a commodity, even as they critique it. In their unabashedly straightforward imitation of banality, Lajoie's songs (and particularly 'Radio Friendly Song') perhaps most clearly espouse this position. Following the other chapters in the thesis, Chapter 5 has continued the exploration of race, gender, and capitalism in mainstream pop and in parody. The full implications of this will be unpacked in the thesis Conclusion.

# CONCLUSION

'A Boy Band Made Up of Four Joshes' ('Four Joshes') is a boy band parody produced for Season 1, Episode 3 ('I Hope Josh Comes to My Party!') of *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend.* The show's titular protagonist is Rebecca Bunch (portrayed by Rachel Bloom), a depressed New York lawyer in her late twenties who moves to West Covina, a small town in southern California, in pursuit of her childhood sweetheart Josh Chan (played by Vincent Rodriguez III). A chance meeting with Josh on a New York street causes Rebecca to feel happier than she has ever done in years, prompting her to immediately fixate on him—and a relocation to West Covina—as the answer to all her problems. In Episode 3, Josh helps Rebecca by inviting guests to her housewarming party, thus relieving her social anxiety about her lack of friends.[1] As Rebecca reflects on how the success of her party is all thanks to Josh, the party scene cuts to a fantasy sequence featuring four Joshes (all portrayed by Rodriguez), each dressed in a different white outfit, thus portraying four different boy band member 'types' (the cute one, the sexy one, the bad boy, and the goofy one), as Lajoie did in 'Pop Song'. The Joshes perform synchronised dance moves as they sing to Rebecca, who becomes an adoring fan at a boy band concert.[2] The sequence is a clear parody of late 90s boy bands: the white outfits are a clear reference to the Backstreet Boys, and the dance moves are inspired by choreography for NSYNC and the Backstreet Boys in their live performances and videos.[3] The original music composed for 'Four Joshes' evokes that of the boy band, including an elevating modulation and liberal use of the 'shimmer' effect.

The first verse and chorus read:

> Girl, I know things haven't always been so easy for you
> Kids were mean, and your daddy walked right out the door too
> Maybe we should have a session, address your anxiety and depression
> 'Cause I got a funny feeling if we do
>
> Baby, you can kiss all your childhood traumas goodbye
> You're never gonna miss all that stress you've been keeping inside

[1] In an earlier song in the episode, Rebecca tries to convince herself that she has friends. racheldoesstuff, *I Have Friends - 'Crazy Ex-Girlfriend'*, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N__AkJriaN4.
[2] The CW Television Network, *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend | A Boy Band Made Up of Four Joshes | The CW*, accessed 14 September 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RPw6sCTh9Q8.
[3] See for example Alex Clarke, *NSYNC Bye Bye Bye Live on HBO Special in 2000*, 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K2sIGfdDQAs; Pop on MV, *Backstreet Boys - As Long As You Love Me - 3/10/2000 - Unknown (Official)*, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9UGpnCZUO5Q.

All your psychological problems
Girl, we're gonna solve them
'Cause we're not just a boy band made up of four Joshes
We're also a team of licensed mental health professionals

The parody song thus displays Josh—the object of Rebecca's desire—as a substitute for a therapist, who will alleviate her childhood trauma (including bullying and a father who left her) and the psychological impact of these which still affects her as an adult. In Chapter 4 I noted the important function boy bands play in the lives of pre-teen girls, in providing a soothing fantasy for the girls to escape into. Sofie Hagen's obsession with Westlife helped her to cope with depression in her teenage years. Josh sings the first verse of 'Four Joshes' still rooted in the party scene. Between the verse and chorus, the 'shimmer' effect sounds as Josh blows glitter dust over Rebecca. We then cut to the fantasy sequence which transforms Josh into a boy band. It is difficult to imagine a clearer representation of the boy band as an object of fantasy. While the pre-teen Rebecca (who also features in the episode, portrayed by Ava Acres) projected her fantastical desire onto boy bands, the adult Rebecca projects this desire onto Josh. As Tyler Michaud observes, 'Rebecca is not chasing Josh per se; she is chasing the fantasy that Josh represents. Specifically, the happiness she felt and wants to feel again. Josh represents a fantasy of love, or in the words of queer theorist Lee Edelman, a "fantasy of totalization"'.[4]

*Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* is notable for its progressive treatment of both feminism and mental health. 'Four Joshes' reflects this progressive stance towards both issues: it playfully critiques of the idea that boy bands can solve the emotional problems of girls, yet in no way does it blame girls for their obsession with boy bands. It acknowledges the important role boy bands play in the emotional development of pre-teen girls, while still drawing attention to the ludicrous nature of the idea that boy bands (or a romantic relationship) could take the place of a qualified psychologist (the Joshes even don a doctor's lab coat halfway through the song). This parodic critique is presented in the context of a television show which challenges the conventional narrative of heteronormative romance. *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* is at once a romantic comedy and a satire of romantic comedies, constantly engaged in a self-reflexive deconstruction of the idea that a woman need only find the perfect man for all her troubles to vanish.

This sympathetic attitude towards girls' relationships with boy band music sets 'Four Joshes' apart from the boy band parodies discussed in Chapter 5. Crucially, 'Four Joshes' examines boy bands from a girl's perspective. It explores the psychological function of boy bands from the point of view of women and girls, in a way which does

[4] Tyler M. Michaud, 'Queering the Family Sitcom', *Gnovis* 19, no. 1 (2018): 25–26.

not implicate or blame boy band fans.[5] While the parodies analysed in Chapter 5 critique the culture industry and the producers of boy bands, 'Four Joshes' focuses on the fans and their relationship with boy band music. In the background to Josh's singing we hear excited screaming from female fans, which continues throughout the song, making sure that the audience cannot forget about the fans, which are the real focus of the song. All the songs in *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* are designed as fantasy sequences playing inside the mind of one of the characters. Crucially, 'Four Joshes' plays inside Rebecca's head—not Josh's. *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* is the brainchild of two women—Bloom and Aline Brosh McKenna—both of whom collaborated with Adam Schlesinger to create 'Four Joshes'. A female-led creative team in an explicitly feminist television show thus led to the creation of a boy band parody from a woman's perspective. Lajoie's 'Pop Song' and Bo Burnham's 'Repeat Stuff' (introduced in Chapter 1) both critique the function male-authored love songs play in the emotional development of female fans, but their attitude is much more scathingly cynical than that of 'Four Joshes'. In its approach to boy bands and their role in the lives of pre-teen girls, *Crazy Ex-Girflriend*'s parody treads a line between cynicism and appreciation. In this sense 'Four Joshes' embodies my conclusion of Chapter 4, which argued that we should hold both the pernicious effects of the culture industry and the agency of young girls in the balance when considering boy bands.

Discussion of a boy band parody that involves significant creative input from women thus highlights issues pertaining to gender and identity in the male-dominated parodies of Chapter 5—and indeed in the thesis as a whole. Another key difference between 'Four Joshes' and the parody songs analysed in Chapter 5 is that the former does not fit into the category of parodies which self-reflexively name the aesthetic devices critiqued. Though 'Four Joshes' includes an implicit satirisation of musical aesthetics, this is not an important focus of the song's critique. Indeed, in my search for Type B parodies which self-reflexively critiqued musical aesthetics, I found only a small number produced by women. Kelly Damon's 'Every Pop Song Ever' fit these criteria, while Axis of Awesome includes a transgender woman (though Raskopoulos presented as male in 2010, when 'How to Write a Love Song' was produced). In her *X Factor* parody song Rachel Parris certainly satirises aesthetics of 'manufactured' pop, though she does not draw attention to this in the lyrics, and thus does not explicitly link the aesthetics to their socio-economic function. Even though the process of naming or not naming the aesthetic critique in the song's lyrics may not seem like a crucial distinction to make between parody songs, I argue in fact that it is: explicitly naming

[5] Another parody song which focuses on the (in this case damaging) psychological effect of boy band music from the perspective of female fans is Amy Schumer's 'Girl, you Don't Need Makeup', which makes fun of One Direction's 'That's what makes you beautiful'. Comedy Central, *Inside Amy Schumer - Girl, You Don't Need Makeup*, accessed 14 September 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fyeTJVU4wVo.

the musical devices in the song's lyrics indicates that aesthetics are an important target of critique, rather than simply a vehicle for the critique contained in the lyrics and video. The case studies throughout the thesis demonstrate the existence of a substantial number of self-referential parodies by male artists. The gender divide is significant, signalling that, in general, men and women have different approaches to mainstream pop parody that produces original music (as distinct from those parodies which produce new videos and/or lyrics to accompany existing music). While men critique aesthetics and link them to wider social factors, women focus less on aesthetic value and more on social factors.

I suggest several reasons for this gender divide. First, I observed in Chapters 1 and 4 that mainstream pop aesthetics (particularly those associated with 'manufactured' formats such as the boy band) have historically been gendered feminine—a gendering that goes hand-in-hand with their devalued status under 'rock ideology'. It is reasonable to assume that, compared with men, women have a heightened awareness of this gendered bias that inflicts musical aesthetic value judgements—and are thus warier of engaging in a critique of aesthetic value in mainstream pop. So while male-produced parodies reproduce the stance of early popular music scholars who succumbed to rock ideology, women are less interested in critiquing the aesthetics of music which has traditionally been gendered female. The second reason that might explain the lack of female-produced self-referential parodies is because it is less common for women to produce pop parodies in general. Boxman-Shabtai notes that music videos on YouTube constitute a 'predominantly male field of cultural production'.[6] She observes a gendered bias that operates in the spheres of both YouTube—'the platform has not lived up to its egalitarian visions'—and comedy.[7] Musical comedy, then, proves no exception to the wider male dominance of comedy, still in the second decade of the twenty-first century.

All the case studies in this thesis—including 'Four Joshes'—indicate that the identity of the parody artist has a significant effect on the meaning of the parody. This applies not only to gender, but also to race. Chapters 3 and 5 concluded that the predominantly white identities of the parody artists were particularly problematic when they satirised music closely associated with black genres. Considering the question of what parody songs reveal about the politics of pop, then, I conclude that while these parody songs do little to disrupt the pervasive societal reception of mainstream pop, they nevertheless provide a fresh lens through which to examine ideology pertaining to race, gender, and capitalism, and the intersection between these. We have seen that some of the parody songs are regressive, imbued, for example, with

[6] Boxman-Shabtai, 'The Practice of Parodying', 4.
[7] Boxman-Shabtai, 7.

sexist ideology. They can exacerbate, rather than alleviate, the problem of cultural appropriation. As they are produced mainly by white men, we can note that they are *demographically* regressive.

The parody case studies—and the analysis of the pop music that they parody—in the thesis further highlight a particular relationship between the politics of difference and anti-capitalist resistance. The futility of anti-capitalist resistance has emerged as a key narrative thread running through the thesis, with Chapters 2, 3, 4, and 5 each having provided a different perspective on this fundamental problem. Chapter 2 introduced a parody song—Flight of the Conchords' 'Think About It'—which demonstrated the contradictions inherent in an attempt to critique the prevailing socio-economic situation through a pop song (specifically Gaye's 'What's Going On'). In a more straightforward move, the lyrics of 'Think About It' additionally highlighted the futility of anti-capitalist resistance in twenty-first-century western society. Through analyses of songs by several parodic white rappers, Chapter 3 demonstrated the limits of self-reflexivity as a tool for socio-political resistance, essentially validating Žižek's critique of cynical distance. A self-reflexive satirical stance was revealed to be an ineffectual form of resistance against cultural appropriation, due to the latter's roots in the economic system of capitalism. When self-reflexive white rappers—parodic or otherwise—gain monetary wealth and artistic credit at the expense of black artists, the damage caused by cultural appropriation is strengthened, not weakened.

Chapter 4 set out the dominant response to boy band music by critics and scholars, showing how this critical discourse often implicitly (and sometimes explicitly) blames girls for buying into the products of the culture industry, rather than confronting the capitalist structures which partly account for boy band music and fandom. The parodies analysed in Chapter 5 target the aesthetics of mainstream pop as a substitute for critique of the economic system which produces such music. In 'Radio Friendly Song', the audience of mainstream pop is used as a scapegoat for a critique of the system which encourages this music to thrive. In all the parodies discussed, the implied distinction between ignorance and knowingness (which is just a reformulation of the mainstream/alternative binary promulgated by rock ideology) positions the producers and audience of the parody songs as those in-the-know and in touch with an 'authentic' resistance to capitalism, while those who consume mainstream pop are held up as ignorant accomplices to the capitalist system.

People, aesthetics, and musical taste: all are used here as scapegoats in place of a focus on the fundamental problem of capitalism. The critique of 'manufactured' pop by critics and musical parody artists constitutes a covert critique of capitalism. To attack the music which is perceived to be the most commercial and standardised according to Adorno's theory of popular music, and to scorn the consumers who choose to listen to

such displays of apparent banality, is to mount an indirect (or sometimes direct) critique of the capitalist system which enables this music to thrive. It must be remembered, however, that all music inevitably exists within the capitalist marketplace. We might therefore suggest that these critics and parody artists—almost all of whom are white men—turn to critique the cultural pursuits of the Other, in lieu of meaningful anti-capitalist resistance, which is arguably an impossible task. When critics scorn the musical taste of women and girls by attacking boy bands or the *X Factor,* they may feel they are resisting the culture industry, and thus the wider capitalist system. But what is the real nature of the work being done here? To what extent do such tactics constitute a congratulatory pat on the back for these men, who smugly remind themselves that they, as superior knowing subjects, are too clever to be duped by the culture industry in the way that these female Others are? This is reminiscent of Žižek's observation set out in the Introduction, that when we are shown scenes of starving children in Africa, the effect of our subsequent charitable donation is not to change the global economic system in order to render such scenes of starvation impossible, but to salve the guilt of the giver by causing them to feel they are making a difference in the lives of these children. By criticising the musical tastes of girls, male critics and parodists might feel they are alleviating the effects of capitalism (by drawing attention to the music that, in their opinion, is most complicit with the system), when actually, by placing blame on the Other, they merely abdicate responsibility for the harm caused by the system while doing nothing to tackle the root causes of that system—thus allowing it to continue.

Parody songs, then, cannot constitute practical resistance to capitalism, but they can influence perceptions about issues pertaining to race, gender, sexuality, and ability. These songs do not stand outside the music industry, but rather constitute a part of that industry. Commercially successful songs by parodic white rappers, for example, exacerbate the problem of cultural appropriation, due to the latter's roots in capitalism. There is very little that scholars, critics, or musicians can do to fundamentally alter the economic status quo. Music is produced and consumed within the capitalist marketplace, whether we like it or not. Several parody artists have shown themselves to be acutely aware of the ultimate redundancy of resisting capitalism through music—parodic or otherwise. For The Conchords, this is a key theme in 'Think About It'. Jon Lajoie demonstrates an awareness of the reality of the relationship between musicians and the capitalist system in his spoof song 'Please Use This Song', in which he cynically portrays a musician begging for his song to be used in any television commercial, as the easiest way for him to make money from his art.[8]

[8] JonLajoie, *Please Use This Song (Jon Lajoie)*.

It is difficult to mount effective resistance against something so complex and all-encompassing as the global economic system. While it is a mistake to consider capitalism to be an entirely abstract concept, since its initial development and subsequent survival depend on the decisions and actions of human agents, nevertheless, so embedded is the capitalist system in twenty-first century western society that it is impossible to pin the responsibility for the system onto any one person or group of people. The difficulty of finding someone to blame for capitalism is observed in the lyrics of Think About It': 'Who is the Man? What makes a man a Man?' (note that the human face of capitalism is gendered male). The impossibility of pinning capitalism down to any one person, place, or thing can easily lead to the suspicion that any form of resistance to the economic system is futile. This feeling of powerlessness in the face of the capitalist system, then, contrasts with the sphere of the politics of difference, in which it is much easier to feel that the actions of ordinary individuals will make a difference in wider society. The politics of difference is partly about how people think and feel, and how those thoughts and feelings translate into the treatment of some people by others in society. (Of course, the politics of race, gender, and other markers of identity are about economics as well: cultural appropriation and the gender pay gap are problems which are undeniably embedded in capitalist structures.) Capitalism, on the other hand, is defined by concrete, external processes and systems, rather than thoughts and feelings. It is much easier for a parody song to alter people's thoughts and feelings than to precipitate a fundamental shift in the economic system.

In 2012 James Currie argued that musicology's focus on the politics of difference served as a distraction from the more urgent political project of anti-capitalist resistance, which the discipline had apparently failed to address.[9] While I do not want to dismiss the politics of difference or advocate the notion that it only functions as a mere distraction from apparently more important problems (and I should point out that Currie's position is likewise nuanced), it is nevertheless useful to note that Currie's argument applies to the attitude of some of the critics and parody artists who are the subjects of this thesis. These critics and parody artists are not 'doing' identity politics in the sense that musicologists are: the latter work to uncover and critique discrimination and bias on the basis of race, gender, sexuality, and other markers of identity, while the former are sometimes guilty of being the perpetrators of such discriminatory behaviour. But in their relationship to capitalism, each of these opposing attitudes function in a similar way. Left-leaning musicologists do not know how to effectively resist capitalism through their work—perhaps because it is an impossible task—and so they turn their attention to an area in which their work can make a difference: the progressive political

[9] See 'Introduction' in Currie, *Music and the Politics of Negation*.

work of identity politics. In a parallel move, critics and parodists who set out to critique capitalism as it pertains to music instead target the identity of Others—most obviously females—as a scapegoat. While the first position takes a progressive stance with regards to identity politics and the second a (perhaps sometimes unconsciously) regressive stance, both positions—unless combined with a concerted focus on society's capitalist roots—nevertheless function as distractions from the fundamental task of anti-capitalist resistance.

Instead of composing a critique that will lead to the dissolution of the capitalist regime, which we know to be fruitless, those involved in musical discourse (critics, scholars, artists) seemingly go around in circles blaming different groups in society for their supposed complicity with capitalism. Adorno, following Marx, might have formulated a coherent—though alas, ineffectual in a practical sense—critique of capitalism through writing about music. His prevailing authority in popular music studies is demonstrated by scholars' dismissal of 'manufactured' pop. The difficulty of moving past Adorno's position is attributable to capitalism's continued presence from Adorno's lifetime until now—far from having been overthrown or morphed into something different, capitalism (and the culture industry) has only intensified in its mode of operating; the 'musical ready-mades' of the *X Factor* constitute a prime example of this. Except for a few surface-level tweaks, Adorno's theory is still valid today. It is little wonder, then, that much popular music scholarship constitutes scholars searching for different ways to use and butt up against Adorno's critique. Ultimately, however, there can be no real theoretical breakthrough while the capitalist system prevails. We can choose different kinds of music to accuse of being the most complicit with capitalism, or to proclaim to be the most resistant to capitalism—but in general this serves only to deflect the essential problem of capitalism onto different people or groups. Whether this is boy band fans (the chosen target for some critics and pop parody artists), Marvin Gaye (targeted by The Conchords), or any other kind of music: all are used as scapegoats for capitalism.

This perspective is undeniably pessimistic. On a more optimistic note, we might focus on what we *do* have the power to change through critical discourse on music, if not the economic system. Considering that identity politics is an arena in which we can effect change, then it might be observed that it is inadequate that most parody pop songs which explicitly critique musical aesthetics are produced by white men. This thesis has demonstrated that such a homogenous authorship has produced a biased perspective on attitudes towards mainstream pop. Including parody songs by women and people of colour, such as 'Four Joshes', serves to give a fuller and fairer representation of perspectives on mainstream pop. This thesis has shown that it is still largely white men who hold the power to shape the dominant narratives of popular culture. While we

might not be able to resist capitalism, we can change this trend, in our project to build a fairer and better society.

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